



7

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

The Hero of
Incandescence
and the
Lamia Queen

Full Clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**



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Prologue: The Melancholy of Princess Sophia

◇ Sophia Eir Roses's Perspective ◇

The moment I heard the report that a hero had sacrificed themselves in Springrogue to stymie the demon lord's resurrection, I couldn't just wait in the capital. I departed for Springrogue immediately.

The news I received during the journey was a string of misfortune.

Setekh and Sciulli, two demons whose reputations persisted to this day, had been revived.

Zagan, the King of Beasts's army had infiltrated Springrogue.

The Snake Sect was pulling the strings.

Maximilian and a hero of Roses had been cursed into petrification.

It's awful. Leonardo, Makoto...please be safe.

I felt faint as I arrived at the village.



"Takatsuki's not waking up..."

"Get up, Makotoooo..."

Aya and Lucy were by the side of a petrified figure, their heads bowed. The figure's face was covered with a white cloth—in Roses, this was a custom afforded to the dead.

I-It can't be...

I fell to my knees...

I'd only just told him to come to Springrogue...

"This is strange," Furiae—the Priestess of the Moon—commented, slapping the covered forehead. "*Breath of the Moon* is the strongest curse-breaking technique I know, but he isn't back to normal. Why?"

You can't treat the dead like that!

"Fuu, that cloth's bad luck! Let's take it off."

"Is it?" Lucy replied, turning to Aya. "That cloth is a magic tool, though. Maybe we should leave it."

O-Oh? I thought they were in tears, but their voices are much more normal than I'd expected.

I hesitantly started making my way toward the three people.

"Fuuri! Can I get you to free another one?"

"Argh! I'm busy! There, it's done."

What?

The moon priestess had freed a cursed person...just by touching them.

"Wh-Whhh...what happened...?" The newly freed elf started patting himself down in confusion.

"You need to remain under observation for a while, so stay in that bed for the day," Furiae briskly instructed the man. "If you don't have any side effects, you'll be free to go!"

Suddenly, someone at my side spoke to me.

"I'm hardly even needed... She really is incredible."

When I glanced around, I saw a familiar face. "Florna," I acknowledged.

"We are honored that you would travel so far, Your Highness. I believe the last time we saw each other was during our graduation ceremony." Though she was smiling, her expression held a tinge of exhaustion.

"You seem rather tired," I observed. "Are you well?"

"Our country was on the verge of collapse," she replied. "Though I imagine it is nothing compared to the warriors' suffering. I apologize that I am unable to offer any better greeting, but we have many injured, so I must take my leave. The chief is in that direction."

After indicating where I could find Canaan's chief, Florna left with quick steps.

I greeted the old man before giving an order to my knights—those who could heal should aid with treating the wounded.

After everything was in order, I headed once again to my petrified hero.

“Takatsukiii, wake uuup,” Aya pestered, straddling his stony form.

“Aya, I don’t think you should disturb him so much...”

“It’s already been four days though!” protested Aya. “I’m tired of waiting!”

The moon priestess let out a sigh. “Why is it that I can heal the others in an instant but am powerless when it comes to my knight?”

Three beauties surrounded Hero Makoto. As his fiancée, perhaps I should’ve felt jealous, but...

He’s currently a statue...

I didn’t feel like I could say anything.

Suddenly, Lucy noticed me. “Oh, Princess Sophia?”

“Sophie, were you worried about Takatsuki?” Aya asked.

“I-Indeed... Is he...?” Nervously, I approached the three.

“Warrior, remove yourself from my knight already. You could break him,” Furiae demanded.

“Okayyyy,” she replied as she climbed down.

“It seems that you have all undergone much hardship. At least you are all safe...barring Hero Makoto, that is.” I peered at him. Considering that he’d been fighting against a demon with the *Eyes of Petrification*, I dreaded to think what rictus of fear his face would be frozen in...

“He’s...smiling...?” I said dumbly. Indeed, he was grinning like someone in the middle of a chat.

“Mmmm, well, he wanted to talk more to that Setekh demon,” Lucy informed me.

“Right, those two were getting along pretty well,” Aya agreed. “At least, as far as we could see. We were quite a distance away.”

That was ridiculous.

“A good relationship with a demon...the church would brand him a heretic if they knew,” Furiae commented with an exasperated look.

“So, will you be able to free him?” I asked.

“I can feel the curse lifting, so it should be broken in a few days,” she replied, tracing a porcelain finger along his lips.

Despite being a woman, even I felt my heart race at how erotic the casual act seemed. I was so glad she wasn't a rival for his affections...

As the thought passed through my head, I heard someone running up behind me.

“You came to Springrogue?!”

“Leo!” I exclaimed. As soon as he ran within arm's reach, I grabbed him and hugged his head. “It must have been so hard.”

“I'm so sorry!” he replied. “I was with him when—”

“It's okay, Leo...” He'd probably been tending to the wounded just as Florna had. He couldn't hide his exhaustion. “Rest a while. The knights I brought with me are helping with the aid.”

“R-Right... Thank you.” With that, he staggered off under the gaze of the guardian knight.

Once he's recovered, I need to tell him to head back to Horn for a while. Mother and father must have been worried about him...

Neither of our parents could easily leave the capital, busy as they were with ruling the country. When they'd heard that the demon lord was resurrecting in the same place their son had traveled to, they'd been ready to mobilize the entire army... They needed to know he was safe.

And so, I spent the next few days in Canaan, and eventually, Hero Makoto awoke.

He needed to rest until he had fully recovered, but...

The very day he regained consciousness, he began training.

“Um... Shouldn’t you be resting?” I found myself asking. Thousands of butterflies he had made with water magic were fluttering around him.

“I haven’t trained in a whole week,” he replied listlessly. “I’ll lose my edge.” He cocked his head at the flock of magical butterflies above him.

Is he not satisfied with his magic...? I wondered.

His spells wrapped around the entirety of the village. He was likely borrowing mana from the elementals to cast them...but this wasn’t just a case of plentiful mana—how high must his proficiency be to control everything? I was honestly lost for words.

I doubted that any other mage in Roses could match the feat.

“Oh, not bad. I’m joining in!” Rosalie proclaimed, wine bottle in hand, as she watched him train. Judging by the rosy tint to her cheeks, she was already mostly drunk.

And then she goes and casts a king rank spell with her other hand?! I thought, aghast, as I watched the Crimson Witch cast a Phoenix.

“Mama, don’t interrupt him!” Lucy complained.

“You lose your focus too easily. You should learn from your boyfriend’s example,” she replied.

“How?! I can’t keep using magic for over *five hours!*”

Right...it has been quite a while since he started. Doesn’t he always do the same?

“Takatsuki always keeps this up for ages.” Aya, who was standing by my side, gave a deep sigh. She was wearing an apron; her hair was tied up, and she carried a frying pan in one hand. Apparently, she was in charge of the party’s food.

“He isn’t even healed yet,” I pointed out. “Jumping right back to long training sessions can’t be good...”

“Huh?” Aya asked. “He usually goes for twelve hours, though.”

“What?!” That was insane. It had to be.

“Besides, it’s almost time,” she added.

“I told you to *rest*, my knight! You’re injured!” Furiae exclaimed, suddenly hitting him with a flying kick.

Well, it was a clean hit...but was that sensible?

“Oof, a direct blow. Normally, he’d manage to dodge. He *must* not be feeling well,” Aya remarked.

“Really?”

“Yup. He has a skill that lets him look in all directions at once.”

I never knew that.

“You’re done training!” Furiae commanded with a fearsome glare. “Now rest!”

“Awww, but I was just getting started...”

“You say the same thing every day! That’s why you haven’t finished healing yet! You don’t have any stamina or mana and you’re *still* pushing yourself! Just lie down already.”

“Fiiine... Oh, Princess?”

“What?”

“I can see your panties.”

“Die!”

She kicked him hard in the head. The noise was so solid that I almost felt the impact.

He deserves it, though...

“I’ll let you know when dinner’s done,” Aya told us before leaving.

“I hope he’ll be— Ack, mama, leggo!”

“You’re not ill, so you need to keep training,” said Rosalie. “Come on, you can do another saint rank spell.”

“No, I’m tired,” Lucy protested, squirming under Rosalie’s arm. I hesitantly made my way to Hero Makoto’s side and softly put my hand on his head.

Water Magic: Healwater.

I doubted it would do much for someone weakened by a curse, but it would hopefully give him a little more energy.

I could hear him murmur in his sleep.

“Hmmm... Yeah, you can’t see up Noah’s skirt...”

What the...? Maybe I should hit him again.

Suddenly, he gasped and shot up. “What happened?!”

“You were having a nice dream, it seemed,” I replied.

He looked at me with wide eyes.

Guh. Stop looking at me so innocently! “Don’t push yourself so much,” I said instead.

“I know...but it was a close call, so I can’t help panicking.” His response was serious.

“What happened?”

“I...can only fight using the elementals’ mana or if the goddesses protect me and give me weapons,” he admitted. “I don’t have any strength of my own... That’s why I can’t relax—I might not be able to use my skills when it counts. It would help if I could at least get stronger when I leveled up.”

He was staring at his dagger.

“Hero Makoto...” I began.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I shouldn’t be complaining.”

Was he...getting depressed? If so, then there was something I should say...

“I don’t think a guardian knight should be looking up his charge’s skirt.”

“Ah, right...”

He wouldn’t stop trying to get stronger, even if he *should* be relaxing. He’d defeated a demon lord days ago, so why was he forcing himself through more training?

“You already have an adorable lover, don’t you?” I asked. “And...I’m your

fiancée, so...you should rely on us.” I wouldn’t rebuff him if he made the approach.

He smiled at the words I’d managed. “Thanks, Sophia. I’ll take a break.” At that, he thumped down to the floor and fell asleep in that spot.

I let out a mental sigh.

This man...

He trained until he dropped, then woke up and trained some more. I’d heard how much it weighed on Lucy and Aya when they adventured together. Still, I remained there, waiting for him to wake up.

When I returned to the chief’s home for dinner, there was a crowd waiting outside.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Looks like someone’s visiting,” Hero Makoto replied from where he was standing at my side.

The people from Highland couldn’t have already arrived, right? That was far too impressive. If so, we needed to get on our way.

However, the identity of the person in the middle of the crowd went far beyond my expectations.

“Oh, it’s been a while!” Hero Makoto waved casually.

Th-That’s no way to—

My thought was interrupted by the response to his wave.

“Hey there, Elementalist. I heard you defeated a demon lord.” A white-haired woman with glowing, ruby-red eyes grinned. Despite her slight stature, there was a sense of tension surrounding her.

G-Grandsage?!

This was Highland’s protector and the strongest mage on the continent—the White Grandsage.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for Great Keith

“I’ve been waiting for you, Elementalist.”

The woman—white-haired and white-robed—had glowing red eyes. The Grandsage should have been in Highland, but she had come to the village chief’s home.

Immediately, she strode toward me.

“Guh!” I managed as she grabbed hold of my collar.

“Where are you taking him?!” Lucy cried out in shock.

Princess Sophia sputtered a confused “What the—?!”

“Son of Johnnie, I’m borrowing that room,” the Grandsage told the chief.

“O-Of course, Grandsage! Please, make yourself at home.”

“I shall,” she said.

Suddenly, my vision went black.

“Wha?”

“We teleported,” explained the Grandsage. “I wanted to talk for a while.”

So was *this* the room she meant? It was really dimly lit, and I could see a bunch of bookshelves. The whole space reeked of dust.

A solid *clunk* sounded behind me. Did she lock the door with magic? Things were getting even more serious...

“Is this some top secret meeting?” I asked.

She remained silent for a moment, ruby eyes piercing me through the darkness. Her usual easygoing smile was absent as she stared seriously at me.

“I heard you defeated Bifrons,” she said eventually.

“Yeah...somehow,” I replied. *This* was what she’d come all the way to Springrogue for?

There was silence for a while. The Grandsage's head was bowed, and I couldn't read her expression. Eventually, the slight woman began to speak.

"I told you that I am a vampire, did I not?"

"Yeah, back in Highland." That revelation had been a real surprise. Then, she'd followed it up by outing my virginity and sucking my blood...

"You know, I was once a human. I was made into a vampire...by Bifrons. In that respect, he was my sire."

"What?!"

H-Her sire? So I killed her father?

"U-Uhm?"

I felt a cold sweat prickling across the back of my neck. I'd taken it for granted that nothing bad would come of the demon king's destruction—of course, this left aside the issue of Setekh in the demons' faction.

But, the Grandsage was a demon...and related...?

"E-Er, I'm not entirely sure what to say..." I stuttered.

She grinned sharply.

"Well done, Elementalist. There was nothing I could do against Bifrons—vampires are unable to cross their sires. If any other demon lord appeared, I would destroy them the moment they made landfall on the continent. The Snake Sect must have wanted him as a tool against me..." The Grandsage began to chuckle cheerily at their misfortune. "But you well and truly put paid to that."

"You're not angry I killed your sire?"

"Why would I be? He ruled the western continent and treated people as little more than livestock. Back when I was human...he was the one that killed and ate my parents, the one who slaughtered the people of my village. If I could, I would've ripped him apart with my bare hands..."

She flashed her fangs and grimaced.

"Abel saved me just as I was about to join them, and that's why I survived. He's not here this time, though. I would've had to get our young Hero of Light

to do something if Bifrons's resurrection had succeeded... Yet, right now, he's still too green."

"Sakurai's doing his best," I said, instinctively defending my old friend.

"I know. He is steadily getting stronger. He'll probably make something of himself before the Northern Front Plan."

"He's an earnest guy. Make sure you help him." Even if he *was* a tad indecisive... Particularly with women!

My words seemed to remind her of something. Her lips quirked. "Are you really in a position to worry about others? The nobles of Highland—no, the continent as a whole—are after you."

"They...are?" I asked. Princess Sophia had said that...but were they *really*?

"The greedy louts are focused on what will happen after the war. That's why the reincarnated Hero of Light was pushed into the royal family. They need to know where to put the second 'pivot.'"

I sighed. The war hadn't even started yet.

"You need to be warier," scolded the Grandsage. "You're an inexperienced hero who defeated a demon lord. On top of that, you are a citizen of a small country. They'll be plotting incentives to bring you to their sides. After the war, they'll be happily claiming territory on the demon continent using that card."

I sighed again. *That* was their thinking? "It's all politics," I stated. "Besides, I *am* technically engaged to Princess Sophia."

"They'll be pretty sure they can work around a small nation's royals. Sophia'll have a lot to deal with too."

Roses is in a pretty weak position...

"So, what are you planning next?" the Grandsage asked me.

"We're heading to Great Keith," I told her. As things were now, it at least sounded like I could keep my head down...but I'd need to talk to Princess Sophia about it.

"Hm, the military country. Their forces will make up the core of the Northern

Front Plan, so we need some form of cooperation with them... Their general and priestess are right pieces of work, though.”

“They are?” I’d have to keep that in mind.

“Make sure you don’t fall for a honeypot.”

“Charm magic doesn’t work on me. I’ll be fine,” I replied confidently.

She gave me an exasperated look and shook her head. “Fool. It has nothing to do with magic. You’ll wake up next to some naked woman, and then half a year later, a kid will pop up and they’ll demand you acknowledge it.”

I had no words. That was terrifying! Besides, I was a virgin...

The Grandsage grinned at my expression. “When that happens, I’ll use my *Appraisal* and prove you’re still a virgin.”

“Could you not?!” That would mean the whole world knowing!

“Then keep your guard up so it doesn’t happen.”

“Fiiiine.” Society was a scary thing. “Thank you for everything, Grandsage... Uh, what’s wrong?”

I’d assumed we’d be going after I thanked her, but her gaze felt heavy on me. She didn’t look angry. If I had to describe it, she looked like a cat sitting in front of a fish.

“I am hungry.”

Right, that makes sense...

“Go ahead,” I said after a pause, kneeling down and opening my collar. She moved slowly to my neck, her cold breath ghosting over my skin.

“Good boy,” she laughed before latching on.

There was a faint pain along with a vague sense of pleasure. My body must have been getting used to it...not that I liked that idea. I could hear the slight gulps of her swallowing. It was a very refined way of drinking, very different from when I’d met Setekh.

That reminded me—he’d been around a thousand years ago as well. Did she know him?

“Grandsage, do you know a demon called Setekh?”

She gave a brief pause. “Don’t talk while I’m eating. Of course I do. He was annoying. Right, you were petrified by him, weren’t you? He can’t eat people, so there’s not much else he *can* do.”

“What?” *He can’t eat people?* “What do you mean?”

“You don’t know? He was a weak undead to begin with, but the Great Demon Lord used *Awakening* to make him stronger. The cost was a curse; Setekh couldn’t attack people. Since he can’t drink human blood, the demons derided him as barely a vampire... His eyes are a real threat, though.”

So that was why he hadn’t tried to drink any of our blood when we’d met him.

“You spoke with him?” asked the Grandsage.

“Yeah. He was pretty happy when I told him Bifrons’s last words.”

If he couldn’t attack people, then was he much of a threat? I guess the petrified fighters were essentially useless in a fight...so that probably counted as threatening.

“What?! You spoke with Bifrons?!” she exclaimed. That was the first time I’d heard her lose her cool.

“Y-Yeah...a little.”

“Impossible... He shouldn’t have had any sense of self... I’m sure that back then...” She trailed off in thought, voice shaking. “What did he say?” she asked.

“Um. He didn’t seem to remember much about himself. He wanted to know who he was.”

There was a long pause, and her voice became more serious. “Did he say anything about Abel? Or anyone else from back then?”

I couldn’t really think of anything... “Not really,” I said after a few moments.

She remained silent for quite a while. “I see,” she finally said. “Then...that’s fine.”

I couldn’t read her expression. *What’s all that about?* The noise of her

drinking started up again.

Man, I'm bored. Besides, she's having my blood, but I shouldn't give it to her for free. Since I had the chance, I'd ask her for help.

"Grandsage, how can I become stronger?"

"You just defeated a demon lord..." she argued.

Well, I hadn't really—he'd wanted to die. "My usual methods for fighting are going to be limited pretty soon."

She hummed. "Your stats are the lowest mankind's can be. Even so, using elemental magic and your weapons allows you to fight well..."

"I couldn't follow anything the Crimson Witch was doing. And, if Bifrons had wanted to fight, I wouldn't be standing here." I couldn't help but feel an immense gulf between us. How I currently was... My current power... I didn't think I could manage.

"You want to become stronger?" she asked. "You know, if you increase in strength dramatically...it will be at the expense of your humanity..."

"What?"

"You're not taking me seriously, are you?" She scoffed. "Take, for example, if I turned you—I think your physical abilities would certainly increase."

"Oooh!"

"The cost would be your elemental magic. Elementals don't like the undead."

"Hm...not happening." I doubted that would go well...and I didn't feel like being a vampire anyway.

"Don't look like that. Rely more on me. Do you know what Highland thinks of us?"

"They think we're lovers," I said, replying with what Princess Noelle had told me.

"Oh, you *do* know." She pouted, maybe because she'd been after some sort of reaction.

On another note...

“Are you done?” I asked.

“A little more,” she begged cutely, looking up at me through her lashes.

“I feel pretty light-headed...” She’d drunk a lot today. Incidentally, she was currently perched on my lap and had her legs wrapped around my waist. Using *RPG Player*, I could tell just how dodgy it looked from an outside perspective.

I really don’t want Lucy or Sasa to see me like this...

“Wahhh, an affair!” came a sudden cry.

Someone had appeared in the room.

“Rosalie?” I asked. She’d gone out of her way to teleport in.

“Crimson brat! Why are you interrupting a meal?” The Grandsage was in a distinctly bad mood—she bared her fangs at Rosalie.

“You came into my territory without asking, now duel me!” demanded Rosalie. “I’ll win this time!”

“I’ll show you just how young you are, brat.”

Immediately, the two of them vanished, teleporting again...without even chanting the spell. Yeah, I definitely couldn’t imagine fighting on their level.

A moment later, I heard an explosion above. *They must be battling now...and with king rank magic!* They were crazy.

The brawl lasted well into the evening.



The next morning, Rosalie was kneeling with her head bowed. "I won't pick a fight with you again," she mumbled. "My regret is as deep as the Seafloor Temple..."

Whoa...a perfect victory.

The Grandsage didn't have a scratch on her. Then again, being undead might've allowed her to heal immediately.

"Why do you try and win with brute force?" the Grandsage asked with folded arms. "You're better than me in terms of skill."

"Jeez, mama..." Lucy complained.

"Do the two of them have a bad relationship?" Sasa asked Lucy.

"Well, mama insists that they're rivals, even though she's never won."

Furiae didn't seem to care and was focused on stroking Twi's throat.

"Guh...I'll remember this," Rosalie said.

"You don't regret it at all, do you?" The Grandsage sighed as Rosalie glared up at her. The Crimson Witch was strong, but the Grandsage was on another level. *She's definitely the strongest mage*, I thought. While I watched the scene play out, Princess Sophia walked up to me.

"Hero Makoto, we should leave for Roses soon. We have been here too long."

I nodded. "Got it." Now that I was all healed up, we could head for Great Keith.

"We'll return to Macallan by carriage," she explained. "The carriage has a barrier to ward off monsters."

"Once we get home, we can take the airship to Great Keith," I suggested. There were no avian dragons in that direction. Some sand dragons lurked on the land route, but none of them could fly.

"Wait, you two," the Grandsage called out, interrupting our planning.

"What's up?"

"I wouldn't return to Macallan," she said. "Highland nobles are waiting for

you.”

“What?” the princess and I chorused.

My face was fixed in a scowl, while the princess wore a look of shock.

“It’s hardly a surprise. Everyone knows that the hero works out of Macallan. Waiting there in ambush is the easiest method to catch him.”

“Well, that’s an issue...” We had to go back, or else we couldn’t use the airship. “What should we do?”

“Well...” Sophia mused. “It will take longer, but we’ll need to take the land route.”

“There’s a better method,” the Grandsage interrupted. She stared meaningfully at Rosalie. “Crimson brat, send them off with your teleport.”

“What? But taking so many people is really tiring!” Rosalie griped.

“You can just split the trips. You have plenty of mana, so put it into something worthwhile.”

Right! Rosalie had taken Lucy and me all over the place.

“Lucy, do you think she’ll do it?” I asked quietly.

“Normally, she definitely wouldn’t...but since the Grandsage is asking, she probably will.”

I felt kind of awkward asking a great hero of a country to do an errand like this, but it’d really help.

“No way! It’s so annoying!” Rosalie whined. “*You* do it! You’re the Grandsage!”

“I don’t have as much mana to burn as you do. Elves have lots of it, so use it for the hero.”

Rosalie sighed. “Fine... Mr. Boyfriend, I’ll send you off in turn once you’re ready.”

“Th-Thank you.” It seemed like they’d come to some form of agreement, so we all hurriedly got ready for the journey. We made sure to say farewell to the village chief, Maximilian, and Florna, along with everyone else in Canaan.

“Sir Makoto! I look forward to meeting you for the Northern Front Plan!” boomed Maximilian. “We can fight together next time.”

“Right, look after yourself,” I said, returning his handshake. The biggest thing we managed was building a good relationship with this hero. His hands sure were huge and rough... Mine were like a baby’s in comparison.

“Are you ready?” asked Rosalie. “You and Lucy first.”

“Me and Makoto?” Lucy asked. “Well, fine. Let’s go, Makoto.”

“Me too!” Sasa interrupted. “They’ll be alone together.”

“Don’t you trust me?!” Lucy demanded.

“You’ll try and get ahead!”

I glanced at Rosalie as the arguments began.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” complained Rosalie, grabbing my arm.

My vision went white with the teleport.

Thus, we all started our journey to Great Keith.



“All right... That’s the last of you...” Rosalie mumbled listlessly, dark circles visible under her eyes. The excessive teleportation must have made her lose a lot of mana... Would she be okay?

“Thank you, Rosalie,” I said.

She just let out a sigh. “You’ve worked me to the bone. I’ll beat that damn sage next time!” As she spoke, a magic circle formed around her. It was more complicated than the teleports she’d done between here and Springrogue.

I wonder if it’s a different type...? “Where are you going, Rosalie? That spell’s not the same.”

“What?” Lucy asked. “You’re not heading back to the village?”

“Oh, well spotted, Mr. Boyfriend! You can read the formulae. I’m actually heading to the moon to train! The Grandsage hasn’t even managed that yet!”

“U-Uhm...” Princess Sophia sputtered as she watched the Crimson Witch roll

up her sleeves. “I would like it if you would aid us with the Northern Front Plan before you challenge the Grandsage...”

Sophia was right—we couldn’t have our allies embroiled in a rivalry while a war raged on around them.

“Oh yeah! Dad said something about that, didn’t he?” remarked Rosalie. “Well, there’s still time until you raid the demon continent. Sure, sure, I’ll join in. Make sure you leave some demon lords for me!”

With that said, she vanished in a teleport. Free-spirited...was definitely the word for her.

Either way, we were now in Great Keith. “We” included me, Lucy, Sasa, Furiae (with Twi on her shoulder), Princess Sophia, and her guardian knight.

“We’re here, Takatsuki!” Sasa exclaimed.

Indeed, this town was Great Keith’s capital, Gamelan. Sasa’s cheer prompted me to look around at what I could see. The whole town seemed to be white. Were the buildings made of sun-dried bricks, maybe?

A lot of the clothing people wore was also white, and many of the folks milling around were much darker-skinned than us. To use terms from my old world, the whole place gave off a kind of “Middle-Eastern” vibe.

However, the biggest impression...was the heat.

It must have been nearly forty degrees. I was pretty sure that Great Keith should be at about the same latitude as Roses, but the vast difference in climate was apparently due to the Goddess of Fire—Sól—and her power.

Great Keith was a tropical country. I could mostly ignore the heat with *Calm Mind* set to 99%, however, there was a bigger problem...

This place had an utter lack of water elementals.

I’d more or less expected that since I’d learned about the country’s climate in the Water Temple. *I’ll be pretty much useless here*, I thought with a sigh.

“Lady Sophia,” the geezer guardian knight greeted as he clattered toward us. “The formalities are now complete.”

Since we couldn't just teleport into Great Keith illegally, our entry into the country had to be legitimized properly. Rosalie had just been confused. She'd exclaimed, "What? I'm always in and out though!" I had a feeling that she'd forgotten her common sense on one of her trips.

"Let us head for the lodgings that our family usually utilizes," Princess Sophia said. "Hero Makoto, have you contacted your friend?"

"I have. Fujiyan said he's on his way." I'd used the magical communication tool. Fujiyan had actually been in Gamelan on business, and he'd apparently turn up in a few days. Until then, we'd all be staying in the same place as Princess Sophia.



“I’m melting. Let’s hurry up,” Furiae griped, wiping the sweat from her brow and loosening her clothes to waft some air around her chest. The fanning led to an indescribable eroticism as it teased glances at her chest.

The men moving down the street stopped as one to stare at her. She...really stood out.

“Lu, you good?” Sasa asked.

“I’m too hot. Your skin’s so nice and cool, though.”

Lucy never dealt well with the heat and was currently draped over Sasa. We needed to get moving already, so we headed for our lodging.

As we did, Princess Sophia told us more about Great Keith. It was a military-led country that dispatched its army at other countries’ requests. The land here wasn’t particularly fertile, but they had good hunting and fishing industries and focused a lot on trade. Currently, there was a swarm of people in the capital because of the upcoming tournament, which was the largest of its type on the continent. The winner of this contest would be treated as Great Keith’s State-Authorized Hero and be given privileges as a state guest for a year. The country as a whole definitely focused on combat.

As I listened to her explanations, I used *RPG Player* to look at as much of the city as I could. After a while, we ended up taking a bit of a break. The girls were drinking chilled fruit juices they’d gotten from a nearby store. I was a little farther out, looking for water elementals. Not that I was having any luck...

Suddenly, the keening wail of *Sense Danger* sounded in my head.

What? But we’re in a town?

There shouldn’t have been any monsters around, and my *Scout* skill—which I’d started up as soon as I heard the alert—wasn’t showing me any enemy.

“Takatsuki! Watch out!”

Sasa had grabbed me as she yelled, dashing away from the spot where I’d been standing. A moment later, there was a massive crash—the recently vacated spot was covered in a dust cloud.

W-Was that a bomb?! Do they have terrorists?!

Yet, as the dust cleared, it revealed a figure. Had they fallen from the sky?

“Aw, you dodged. Well, you *are* the hero who’s defeated a demon lord.” The person who spoke was a woman, and her tone sounded slightly languid. She had dark skin and glossy black hair cut short. Her narrowed eyes made her look like a panther or something similar. She wore light armor, but her legs and shoulders were bare.

However, she had masses of aura covering her body... She was obviously anything but defenseless.

“Nice to meet you...” she remarked. “I’m the Hero of Incandescence, Olga Sól Talisker.” I couldn’t tell where she was looking. “So...Hero of Roses. How about a fight to the death?”

Her lips quirked into a crescent... A fierce smile.

This wasn’t good!

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Is Attacked

“Let’s go,” the exotic beauty proclaimed. Her body was exuding a billowing orange aura.

The Hero of Incandescence... Olga Sól Talisker, Sól’s chosen hero...

Meeting Great Keith’s hero and priestess was at least technically our goal in coming to the country. You could argue that we were working toward our introductions at this moment...but the fighter in front of us didn’t look willing to have a peaceful chat.

I let out a gasp; Olga’s fist was closing in on my face.

D-Dodge!

I dodged, and it was close...well, I was close to actually dodging, that is. The fist impacted my shoulder and I went flying.

Ow!

“Takatsuki!” Sasa yelled.

“Oh...that hit?” the hero asked, head cocked.

You’re the one that punched me! Don’t look so confused!

“What are you doing?!” Sasa demanded. leaping at her.

“Wah, that’s a shock.” Despite calling it a shock verbally, she sure didn’t look surprised as she handled the oncoming attack.

Seriously, Sasa wasn’t managing in close quarters?!

“Guh,” Sasa grunted in a panic.

“*Water Magic: Ice Needle*,” I cast, trying to help her. With no elementals around, that was about all I could do!

“Hm?”

Olga dodged it like it was nothing?! I’d cast it right in front of her eyes...and

she dodged just from seeing the spell for a split second?

“Annoying,” she declared flatly. For some reason, despite Sasa’s attacks, she’d been totally focused on me.

Dodge!

I let out a cough as a strike hit my stomach. I couldn’t dodge her attacks at all—she just adjusted her aim when she saw my skill activate.

“Knock it off, you little!” Sasa yelled, using *Dash* from her *Action Game Player* skill set.

“Hmm... You’re pretty strong for being so cute,” Olga commented, easily countering.

“Argh!” Sasa cried. She...went flying! Her body smacked into a nearby house.

“Aya!” Lucy yelled.

Damn, what kind of monster is she?! Is Sasa okay?

“What’s going on?” I heard someone say as a crowd gathered.

“Lady Olga is rampaging.”

“Again? Who’s she up against this time?”

She was a repeat offender?

“Hero Olga! Cease this!” Princess Sophia demanded sharply. The hero’s movements stopped immediately.

“Hmm? Oh, Sophie!” She smiled and waved at the princess.

“What were you thinking?!” Princess Sophia demanded. “Why would you attack my hero and his companions?!”

“It was just a little greeting,” Olga replied with a grin. With that smile, she didn’t look like she had a bad bone in her body.

Why did she come after us as soon as we arrived? She was clearly gunning for me.

“When I heard he defeated Gerald and the demon lord, I just thought he might be some fun. Aww, what a letdown. See youuuu.” Olga squinted, almost

sneering at us, and then jumped up, vanishing into the air.

“What in the world...?” Furiae asked from her hiding place.

Ah... Sorry, Furiae, for forgetting you despite calling myself your guardian knight... I apologized mentally.

“Sasa!” I yelled out, rushing over. Lucy was tending to her. She didn’t look injured at least...

Sasa peered up at me and spoke quietly. “I’m sorry... I lost.”

“It’s not your fault,” I replied. “She’s just crazy.” Sasa didn’t need to worry about that. I was just glad she was safe.

“Hero Makoto, we are drawing a crowd,” Princess Sophia pointed out. “We should move to somewhere more peaceful.”

“Right, we need to let Sasa get some rest.”

After that, we carried on toward our lodgings with heavy feet. Once we arrived, myself, Princess Sophia, and her guardian knight gathered in a big room. Sasa must have still been in shock—she’d shut herself away. Lucy and Furiae were currently cheering her up.

I’ll have to go check on her later.

“Hero Makoto...I must apologize. The Roses family has issued a formal complaint against Hero Olga’s earlier actions.” Princess Sophia’s shoulders were shaking. I was angry as well, but apparently, she was even more so.

As I replied, I kept *Calm Mind* set to 99%. “What was she after, attacking so suddenly?” I was almost certain that Olga had witnessed our arrival. That’s how she’d been able to attack us as soon as we set foot in Gamelan. It just...didn’t make sense to assault a group containing a princess...even if you were a hero.

“The attack...was likely due to Great Keith’s superiors,” Princess Sophia replied, letting her eyes drop.

“What do you mean?” Why were the leaders of the country trying to pick a fight with us?

“Sir Hero,” the geezer interjected, his tone vexed. “Great Keith is the second

largest country on the continent... This is only an assumption, but a weaker country like us defeating a demon lord likely does not sit well with them. They may see it as a slight against them that the weakest country in the alliance succeeded against a demon lord first.”

Sophia pursed her lips. “Great Keith apologized for their hero’s rude actions... However, there are rumors in the street that go along the lines of ‘Makoto, the Hero of Roses, was no match for Olga. Defeating the demon lord was just luck.’ This narrative is being spread by the citizens.”

“Then me losing wasn’t good for Roses...” I mused, slumping. It wasn’t like there was much I could do here anyway...not without water elementals.

“N-No!” Sophia countered hurriedly. “Your accomplishments in halting the demon lord’s resurrection are no less important!”

“Indeed, Sir Hero,” agreed the guardian knight. “Besides, Princess Noelle’s friendliness with our nation has been spreading all the more. That is also likely to have influenced Great Keith’s actions.”

“Highland and Great Keith have had a contentious relationship militarily for many years,” Sophia explained. “Roses getting in the middle of things...probably spurred on Great Keith.”

“Man, what a pain...” I didn’t want anything to do with international diplomacy between other countries, but as a State-Authorized Hero, avoiding it was probably a pipe dream.

“Sir Hero, I want to ensure that you are aware... Did you know that a large part of Princess Noelle’s friendliness toward our nation is due to your own friendship with the Hero of Light?”

“Is me being his friend really that big a deal?” I asked. Sakurai and I were just neighbors back in Japan.

“Hero Makoto...” Princess Sophia began with a somewhat exasperated sigh. “He is being treated as the reincarnation of the Hero of Light. Simultaneously, he claims you as his greatest friend. Your relationship is already known across all six nations.”

Whaaat? Well...we are old friends, I guess.

“However, I had not foreseen things becoming like this. My apologies...we should not have come to Great Keith... We can return to Roses right away.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you don’t need to apologize,” I told the princess. “They’re the ones in the wrong.” Seeing her slump like that, I wanted to quickly cheer her up. “Besides, if we go now, it’ll look like we’re running—that’ll make things even worse. We’re here, so we should try and get something out of it.”

At least...that’s what I said, but the main reason I wanted to stay was more personal—I was pissed at Olga for the sudden attack and for making Sasa sad. I wasn’t going to be happy if we just left things be.

Princess Sophia paused for a moment, mulling over my words, then said, “Very well. However, please stay within our lodgings for the time being.”

She might have intuited the actual reason I wanted to stay here, so I just nodded obediently. I wasn’t going to go off half-cocked for revenge. I needed to get information first.

Besides...

I’m exhausted... I’ll go see Sasa and then head to bed.

Yet, when I stopped off at Sasa’s room, it seemed like she was already asleep, so I didn’t get to talk with her.

The next day, Fujiyan and Nina barged into my room.

“My esteemed Tackie!” Fujiyan exclaimed. “I heard you were badly injured against Lady Olga! Are you well?!”

“Mister Takatsuki’h! Are you so wounded you cannot leave your bed’h?! We brought an elixir’h! Hurry and drink it’h!”

Uh? The rumors were getting a bit out of hand...

“Fujiyan, I’m fine,” I assured him.

I was pretty sure an elixir—the highest level of potion—cost around a million gald. It was a drinkable medicine...and I kind of wondered what it tasted like.

“Oh...” he murmured. “I had heard that you were gravely injured and

unconscious. That was false, then. Thank goodness...”

“Yeaah, they’re really going ham with the rumors,” I replied.

So now I was having to fight off information from the citizens of Great Keith as well... They were all *really* pissing me off.

I did feel bad for making Fujiyan and Nina worry, so I explained everything that had happened.

“I see...” Fujiyan remarked once I’d finished. “So the relations between Highland and Roses have caused this. I suppose there are rumors about you defeating a demon lord... And, of course, there’s the idea that the ‘reincarnation of the savior’ is linked to Highland. These things in combination would seem rather threatening to the other nations.”

“The...rumors?” I asked after a pause.

“Oh? Were you unaware? Within Springrogue, stories abound of your gallant appearance alongside the Crimson Witch to save the country from certain destruction.”

Hang on! Now there’s way too much exaggeration on both sides. I ended up turned to stone at the end of the battle with the demon lord...

“The information comes from Springrogue, and they’re known for not having much to do with other countries’h. The merchants are all taking it as fairly credible’h,” Nina added, ears flicking as she did.

I had no idea...

I hadn’t talked much with Fujiyan lately, so I was lacking on the information front. I needed to pay more attention to intel gathering in the future. Fujiyan and I spent time exchanging info while Nina went to check on Sasa.

“That must have been quite the burden,” Fujiyan murmured earnestly.

“Well, yeah.”

We were chatting over some tea Nina had brewed for us. We’d started out by catching each other up, and now we were just shooting the breeze. Looking at him, I felt a weird sense of discomfort. It might have been tiredness due to traveling, but something seemed off about him...

“So, you said you had things you needed to do here, right? What kind of things?” I asked.

For once, Fujiyan gave no answer.

“Can’t you say?” I pressed.

“Well...it is just normal business,” he replied.

He was hiding something. That wasn’t like him. “Are you in trouble?”

In response, silence.

“I’m not going to try and force you to talk, but...” I probably wouldn’t try and get anything more out of him.

“Well...I would not say I am *hiding* something, per se.”

What was it then? He hesitated to speak for a while, and I just waited quietly.

Eventually, he spoke, words heavy. “In truth...it seems that a classmate of ours is enslaved in the city.”

Ouch, that’s worse than I expected. Enslaved...

The existence of slaves was not exactly rare on the continent, though I’d hardly ever come across any. The reason was that Roses didn’t have a system of slavery, which was apparently a policy handed down from the royal family.

Mako, I hate slavery, Eir chimed in.

So it was because of Eir’s distaste... Roses was a theocracy, so their policies reflected their goddess’s feelings.

I-I hate slavery too!

Noah...you don’t need to compete.

Oh? Were you thinking of picking yourself up a cute little slave girl and raising her to your liking? Noah asked me.

Dirty Mako! chided Eir.

No! What are you both on about?!

Anyway, we’d gotten off topic. Slaves didn’t exist in Roses, but what about the other countries?

Highland, Great Keith, Cameron, and Caol Ilan all had systems in place for it. The purposes were varied. Some were for labor, others for military matters, and others still were for sex work. It really wasn't the nicest thing to consider.

"So...who is it?" I asked hesitantly.

I only really had Fujiyan and Sasa—and Sakurai, I guess—as friends within the class. Fujiyan had a much wider circle, though.

"Lady Keiko Kawakita," he proclaimed.

Who's that? I couldn't remember ever hearing the name.

"What, Keiko?!" Sasa's voice came through the door. She must have been walking past.

"You good, Sasa?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry, I just fell asleep last night. Anyway! Fujiwara, Keiko's a slave?!" she demanded, rushing through the door and shaking his shoulders.

"P-Please, calm yourself, Lady Sasaki. She was initially living in Highland, but an ill-natured noble deceived her into a massive debt... Thus, she fell to slavery and registered for a soon-to-be-held sale. I simply happened to see her name."

"Th-That's awful!" Sasa looked stricken at his explanation, and Fujiyan looked pained as well.

The mood took a grave turn. At this point, I could hardly say, "*I can't even think of what she looks like,*" so instead, I turned to Sasa and asked, "You were friends?"

"Yeah, we hung out sometimes. She was a bit much but not a bad person."

"Indeed...the two of you were friends," Fujiyan mused.

Well, if Keiko was one of Sasa's friends, then we couldn't just leave her. "You want to save her?" I asked Fujiyan. That certainly seemed like how things were going.

"Right!" Sasa yelled. "We need to rescue her! But...how?"

"Sasa, you can free slaves with money." I turned to Fujiyan. "Right?" It wasn't a natural thought for those of us from Japan, but here, you could effectively buy

a person. *So, with Fujiyan's riches, we should be fine...*

"That...may not be feasible." His face darkened as he explained—apparently, the powerful skills possessed by otherworlders made them sell for exorbitant sums. She had a rare skill, so the price followed suit.

"Slaves are usually sold in an auction format, so the person who makes the largest offer becomes their owner. However, Lady Keiko's owner has already been decided by the nobility. Actually presenting her is solely to demonstrate their influence."

"What the...?"

Sasa's face soured further at that. This "hobby" of slavery definitely wasn't the best.

Keiko...Kawakita... Nope, I didn't remember her at all. There had to be something...

Noah then piped up to jog my memory. *Makoto, don't you remember the three stooges mocking your stats in the temple?*

Three stooges?

The only people I could think of who'd mocked me were Kitayama, Okada, and...

Oh! That's her. The gyaru-looking one that was with them! She was the type of person I couldn't deal with or get close to at all. So that was Kawakita. She'd ended up a slave...

Still...

"You were friends with her?" I asked Fujiyan.

Sasa was sociable so that was one thing, but game addicts like Fujiyan and me were pretty much Kawakita's exact opposite.

"Lady Keiko lived in my neighborhood, and I've known her since preschool. We'd barely spoken since entering high school, but I cannot simply pretend to ignore her enslavement..."

"Oh yeah! You went to the same junior high as her. You're childhood friends!"

Sasa exclaimed, smacking a fist into her open palm.

So that's how they knew each other.

That was like me and Sakurai... Wait, it'd be the other way around for us—I'd probably end up the slave. And then Sakurai would come dashing in gallantly to save me. Yeah, that was scarily plausible...

Either way, this wasn't the time to be making up weird situations.

Well, at least we know what we're doing. "Let's get a plan together, Fujiyan!" I said.

"Yup! Let's save her!" Sasa exclaimed. "Oh, also, Takatsuki—I need to talk to you later..."

"Huh? Uh, sure."

What would it be about?

"P-Please wait a moment! Both of you." Fujiyan seemed sufficiently flustered. "Lady Keiko is to be owned by one of the most famed nobles in the country. There are many rumors surrounding them. I fear this rescue may be significantly dangerous—"

But Sasa cut him off. "Fujiwara! We can't be scared of what-ifs! We're saving our friend!"

Sasa was as brash as ever.

"We're friends, Fujiyan. We're helping," I agreed.

"Sir Tackie, Lady Sasaki... I shall remember this debt."

We all nodded at each other.

"So, how are we doing it? Can I sneak in and get out with her?" Sasa asked. She started off at the most extreme scenario...

"That will not be possible. Slaves are collared and their restraint requires a twenty-digit code to remove. The slave master is the only one that knows the code," explained Fujiyan.

"Aww. Guess that's not happening." Sasa slumped.

“That’s a bit much for security.” This world was similar to Earth’s Middle Ages...so I’d expected something laxer!

“Slavery is strict in this world. After all, these are ‘lives’ being sold, to one degree or another.”

“I don’t even know what to say.” I sighed. Real life wasn’t as easy as games.

“Therefore,” Fujiyan continued, “we can only save her once ownership has been transferred to the noble.”

“They’re a pretty bad example of nobility, though, right?” asked Sasa.

“Indeed. They are said to crave attention and have the strength for it...along with being quite avaricious.”

Sasa and Fujiyan’s expressions darkened as they talked it out.

Hmm...

I tried to put everything together. Our goal was to save our classmate. Our enemy was a wicked noble. Legal methods wouldn’t work.

So...

“All right, Fujiyan,” I announced. “We know what we can do.”

“Oh?”

“You’ve got an idea?”

Fujiyan and Sasa waited with bated breath for what I’d say.

With all the factors together, there was only one method.

“Our solution...is assassination!”

Silence followed.

Uh?

“It most certainly is not.”

“Nope.”

Are you an idiot? Even Noah had joined in with them.

W-Wait, it wasn’t a good idea? Well, I guess not. Sorry, game brain. I’d have

to think of something else...

“Kidding, kidding,” I said, scratching at the back of my head.

Then, a soft voice drifted down from the heavens. *Makoooo, let me know if you want to kill someone☆ I'll tell Sól and we can deal with it ahead of time! No worries☆*

“Um...?” I said after a *long* moment. Eir had spoken the same as she always did, as if we were just chatting about the weather.

Um, Eir?

What's up?

So even if I assassinate someone...it won't cause issues?

Nope! It'll be fine.

Fine, huh?

Though it'll cost you☆

Are you planning on being unreasonable again? Noah interjected. *Just so you know, he's not converting.*

But then I can let him assassinate whoever.

Well, that's...

Yeah, these were definitely ruling goddesses, but they sounded like kids. It was like they were angling for their personal interests while deciding life and death.

“Sir Tackie?”

“Takatsuki?”

My face had taken on a serious cast—I'd apparently worried the other two. It also seemed like Fujiyan's *Mind Reading* couldn't hear the goddesses.

“Ah, my bad. I was trying to think of a good plan.”

I'll take that suggestion under advisement, Eir. Though...don't ask me to convert.

Yup. Roger that☆

Makoto...you need to be careful not to bargain too much with the other goddesses, warned Noah. *You'll end up in ruin.*

R-Right, Noah. I'd be careful. Bargaining with goddesses was a real trump card, but I could definitely end up destroying myself with it.

So instead, I focused on the people in front of me. Both of them were silent in thought.

"Why not ask Sophie?" Sasa suggested.

"That might work," I agreed. She might not be from this country, but a royal request wouldn't be dismissed out of hand.

"That...may be worth the attempt, but the noble in question is close with Great Keith's royal family. Even the Roses family may not be able to get results. And if things go poorly, it could even lead to problems for Roses as a whole..."

"Right..." Yeah, the Roses royal family definitely had a weaker influence outside of their own country.

"We will therefore utilize a spy to gather information," proclaimed Fujiyan.

"A-A spy..." Sasa murmured, eyes wide.

Fujiyan was way beyond a high schooler now.

"So we find a weakness and *negotiate* with them?" I asked. Threats like that were probably illegal too, but I guessed less so than assassination.

"That would work poorly. They are highly placed nobility and doing so will simply invite retribution. I am aiming to find out what they desire. Judging by the noble's character, it is unlikely that Keiko herself is the aim. She is merely a piece of a grand collection. If I suggest something more desirable, *actual* negotiation may be possible."

"I-I see..."

"That's our Fujiwara."

Sasa and I could only marvel. His viewpoint was completely different from someone like me, who was an amateur at this kind of thing. We'd have to leave the planning to him.

“What’s this noble’s name, by the way?”

“He is the third son of the Bunnahabhain family, Martin Bunnahabhain. The family has produced a great many mariners. However, Sir Martin himself is unaffiliated with the navy and lives a libertine lifestyle...”

I hadn’t heard of the family, but considering how Great Keith was a military nation, I’d been told to avoid interfering with those connected to the military. This was going to be tricky...

“I might not be able to do much, but I’ll try and think of something,” I said.

“Yup, me too!” cheered Sasa.

Fujiyan gave an apologetic thanks at that. A famous noble family... I couldn’t treat things as casually as dungeoneering.

Suddenly, I had a thought. “What did you want to talk about again, Sasa?” I needed to ask before I forgot.

“I shall take my leave,” Fujiyan said.

“Nah, you can stay. Well...” She scratched at her cheek, speaking haltingly. “I...think I need to get stronger...”

“Sasa...” I began. I guess not being able to do anything against Olga was actually weighing on her. “She attacked because I’m the Hero of Roses—you’re a victim there. Besides, the rumors about the loss are all about me.”

“But if I hadn’t lost so easily, I’d have been able to help. That’s why I want to get stronger,” she declared.

“Even so, Lady Sasaki, you cannot simply challenge Hero Olga...even if you do gain strength,” Fujiyan asserted. “She is an important figure in Great Keith, and not someone we can easily procure an audience with.”

“Right.” I nodded in agreement. “There’s no point if you can’t have a rematch.”

“That’s fine!” said Sasa. “I heard from Sophie that the tournament winner gets to fight an exhibition match against the Hero of Incandescence. See?”

“Huh... Olga’s not joining in?”

“Ah, no, she’s not,” Fujiyan confirmed. “I am aware of that due to how much it has been spread. Since she emerged victorious from the last three instances of the tournament, its popularity waned and she was forbidden from entering. However, the spectators still wish to see her. Thus, the exhibition match.”

“I-I see...” She really was monstrously strong.

“So...what do you think?” Sasa asked.

I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was really motivated. *She’s always stubborn when she gets like this.* I probably couldn’t stop her.

Welp, only one thing for it, then. I locked eyes with Fujiyan and he returned a nod. *We’re probably thinking the same way.*

“Fujiyan, it is finally time.”

“Indeed. I thought it would never see the light of day.”

Sasa looked questioningly at us.

“Takatsuki, Fujiwara? What do you mean?”

“Sasa, let’s get you leveled up... Time to punch her!”



Sasa, also known as Aya Sasaki.

Her reincarnation had transformed her into a lamia. She was level 35, and her stats easily surpassed even Nina, who was a gold rank adventurer. Sasa had also done absolutely no training since her arrival—she’d just been strong from the start.

After surviving Labyrinthos, she’d started a bit of back-and-forth training with Nina to learn some basic martial arts. She also wielded a weapon from the Roses royal family’s vault—the Fierce Deity’s Hammer—but she rarely used it to fight and mostly kept it as an accessory.

Lucy trained for five hours a day (until her focus ran out); I trained for twenty hours (or any time I wasn’t passed out). Sasa’s training time...was zero.

She labeled herself as “behind the scenes,” which involved carrying all our gear, cooking, and supply replenishment. Essentially, she was full-time support.

Even so, Sasa was, without a doubt, our strongest party member.

While Lucy had learned king rank magic, her control was still awful. As for me? One flick from Sasa would send me flying. In other words...

Who knew how strong Sasa could be if she trained properly?

"It's freezing!" Lucy complained, glancing at me. She was shivering and hugging herself over her normal thin attire.

"Well, look at what you're wearing," I replied, shrugging off my jacket to lend her.

"So...my knight. Why are we here?" Furiae was wrapped from head to toe in blankets, with only her face peeking out. I'd get a slap if I said she didn't look quite so refined in that getup...

Presently, we were a few dozen kilometers away from the capital. The area was called the Giant's Chair and was home to several massive flat-topped table mountains. These formations jutted up around a thousand meters from the ground, with sheer cliffs that were impassable on foot. Unlike the sweltering wasteland that made up the plains of the country, here in the high-altitude mountains, the temperature had plummeted.

"How picturesque," Fujiyan commented.

"It's definitely some view," I agreed.

He and I peered down from the cliffs, admiring the vast orange expanse beneath us. Fujiyan had—along with his airship—been our ride here. As we took in the view near the cliff's edge, Sasa and Nina both called out for us to be careful. Maybe we'd gotten a bit carried away...

I turned back to Sasa and announced, "Let's get you leveled up!"

"U-Uh, sure..." she stammered. "How?"

Oh. Guess I'd just dragged her here without explaining anything.

"Allow me, Lady Sasaki!" exclaimed Fujiyan. "Normal adventurers cannot tread on these table mountains due to their prodigious height, and many rare monsters inhabit this environment. There are over a hundred of these mountains, and the one we are standing on offers a unique opportunity for

rapid-leveling: a whole nest of platina lizards!”

“If you take out a bunch of them, you’ll hit the level cap in no time! Ain’t that great?!” I asked enthusiastically.

“R-Right...”

While Fujiyan and I were all excited, Sasa seemed oddly reserved. Why?

“How do you know that, Makoto?” Lucy wondered.

“Come on, Lucy! Learning the prime grinding spots is a basic strategy for playing RPGs.” I let out a sigh and gave a disappointed shake of my head.

Furiae stared at me coldly. “You seem awfully excited, my knight. How tiresome...”

Maaan, tough crowd...

“So, where are they?” Sasa asked, looking all around. At a glance, this plateau contained only sparse shrubbery and not any creatures.

“Oh, that’s right’h,” Nina said. “It will take us most of the day to even find them’h. Plus, the lizards are so timid that they rarely ever show themselves’h. That’s part of why no adventurers bother to train here’h...”

She seemed a bit worried, but I just chuckled along with Fujiyan. She didn’t have it quite right...

“Lucy. Fire, if you would. Lots of it,” I requested.

“Huh? I mean, it’s cold, so fine... *Fireball.*” She swung her staff and a ball of flame the size of a shed appeared in the air.

“What now?” she asked.

“Just keep it up for a bit. Princess, could you cast some *Charm Magic*?” I asked, pivoting to Furiae.

“Me? On who?”

“The platina lizards love the heat. We’re here, though, so they’ll be too timid to come out. I want you to call them up with your charms.”

“You really are a slave driver... And all this after you abandoned me when

Olga attacked.”

Ack, crap. She’s not happy.

“No way, I didn’t do that,” I countered. “I thought you’d be safe since you were hidden.”

“Hmm, really? It seems to me like you’re consistently forgetting that you’re my guardian knight.”

“It’s all good!” I assured her. “I’ll be guarding you properly.”

“Hmph. You’ll regret it next time.”

Well, I seemed to have more or less gotten her on my side. Without another word, she flung away the blankets she was wrapped in.

“Whoop’h!” Nina exclaimed, rushing to catch them.

“Here I go,” Furiae announced. “I’ll be using my voice, so everyone cover your ears... You needn’t bother, my knight.”

“Will you be okay?” Sasa asked.

“You don’t need to cover your ears?” Lucy added. Both of them looked at me cautiously.

“It’s not like the charm will affect him anyway,” said Furiae.

“You’re not just trying to tempt him?” Lucy prodded suspiciously.

“You can’t do that, Fuu!” exclaimed Sasa. “No getting ahead.”

“I’m not!” Furiae yelled before backing away from them. “Quit looking at me like that. You two are scary! Anyway, here I go.”

She took a deep breath, put her hand on her chest, and began to sing.

Her voice sounded clearly across the plateau, chiming along the wind. Just hearing it almost had a bolstering effect. It was far more beautiful than the harpy queen’s voice we’d heard in Labyrinthos.

That’s Furiae all right...

Before we knew it, birds and bugs had gathered around us in response to her voice. Then, a few dozen small shining lizards crawled out from the crag. They

were soon warming themselves beneath Lucy's fireball.

"Oh, here they are. What a haul." I smiled, turning to Furiae. She looked back at me with a flat look.

"That was the pinnacle of charm songs. It once let me control a dragon. And still, it did nothing to you?"

"Well, it wouldn't be a good thing if it did," I returned.

"If only it at least did *something*," she complained.

I really wished she'd stop trying to get me with *Charm Magic* any time she could. It wasn't like she was Noah...

After that exchange, I turned to the others, who still had their ears covered, and tapped Sasa on the shoulder.

"Get them, Sasa."

"R-Right. I feel kinda bad... Still, I need to get stronger!"

Her face turned to an expression of certainty as she hefted her Fierce Deity's Hammer. Suddenly, she vanished—a combination of her *Dash* skill from *Action Game Player* and *Stealth*.

In an instant, all of the platina lizards were dead.

She leveled up all at once!

We had just returned from the table mountains. As I was training in the inn's courtyard, someone approached me from behind.

"Hero Makoto," Princess Sophia called out. "I heard that you traveled somewhere to work on your levels? Should you not rest?"

By the way, since this was an inn where the Roses royal family occasionally stayed, there were several artificial ponds and fountains in the courtyard that some water elementals were enjoying. Unfortunately, unless you were right next to water like this, there weren't any of them around. I was sitting on the lawn and talking with the elementals while practicing my magic.

Sasa, Lucy, and Furiae had gone for a bath—the inn had a huge one—and

then they were going to have a girls' night. Fujiyan was off somewhere working with Nina.

"May I sit?" the princess asked.

"What? Uh, sure."

She sat in the same way as me, right on the grass. On top of that, she was practically leaning against me, her back to mine.

"U-Um?" I could feel her soft skin against my back.

"You left me behind...but took everyone else."

Because of how we were sitting, we couldn't see each other's faces. At least, that's what the princess seemed to think, but I used *RPG Player* to check on her expression just in case.

She's really sulking...

I mean, I *had* left a message for her. Maybe I should have told her in person.

"Did it go well?" Pouting expression aside, her voice was cool and even.

"We got thirty levels today." Those lizards really were walking XP. The steady increase in level was utterly ridiculous.

"Th... *Thirty?!'*"

Apparently, she couldn't keep calm in response to that, and she whipped around to look at me. Her long hair slid against the back of my head. I turned around as well and met her eyes up close.

We looked at each other silently for a few seconds.

"S-So Aya must have grown considerably stronger," she said. While her cheeks were pink, her voice was strong.

"Not yet, unfortunately. We haven't caught her up with Olga."

The fight with Olga hadn't lasted long, but according to Sasa, she knew she couldn't match the hero even slightly. I thought the two of them were way too strong, and I couldn't even see the difference.

"Will she be ready for the tournament?" Sophia asked in concern.

There was around a fortnight left until the tournament began. We'd let the princess know that Sasa would be participating. Sophia had been a little worried, but she hadn't refused. The tournament was—to some degree—set up like a sporting competition, with safety in mind, so Sasa's life wouldn't be at risk.

Princess Sophia's guardian knight had been all depressed that I wasn't participating. But I had no intention of doing so when I couldn't use the water elementals.

"We'll do as much as we can over the next two weeks," I proclaimed. "I *do* have some tricks up my sleeve, though."

"Very well. I shall look forward to it." Her expression softened but soon morphed back into a serious look. "On to other matters. I heard of this from Lord Fujiwara... One of your comrades is to be sold as a slave...to the Bunnahabhain family..."

Keiko Kawakita.

"Yeah. We're waiting for Fujiyan to finish investigating," I said.

"I apologize... They are strong nobles with much influence in Great Keith's military. In addition, they offer Roses support when we suffer losses from monster attacks, so I cannot come on too strongly..."

Her face had fallen into sadness. The Bunnahabhain family really was too powerful.

"It's not your fault," I assured her. "Although, on that note... Could we go through Sakurai or Princess Noelle?"

Those two were the reincarnation of the savior and Highland's next monarch respectively. I doubted they'd be ignored. Yet, Princess Sophia's face remained clouded.

"While Highland and Great Keith are of different strengths overall, they compete militarily. Great Keith is currently aiming to get more out of the northern front and become the overall leader on the continent. At this point, any negotiations would be fraught..."

“I see...” Well, Fujiyan would have long since thought of that. Things just weren’t going well.

The last resort is bargaining with Eir. But...

I remembered Noah’s warning: careless divine bargains invite ruin. Counting on her for too much would be risky. We’d just have to keep going. At the moment, there was nothing else I could do...

“Are you heading off soon?” I asked. “You’ll probably want your beauty sleep.” I was going to keep up training for a bit longer, but suddenly, I felt her grab my arm.

“Hero Makoto, your excessive training is bad for you. Sleep soon.”

“Ah, I’ll just keep up— Hey, don’t pull!”

She tugged me over with incredible strength. *I mean, my stats are stupidly low...*

There was no way I could beat Eir’s priestess in a contest of strength, so I found myself shut up in my room.

The days after that were spent leveling up Sasa. At night, we investigated ways to help our enslaved classmate, gathering information in bars and such.

Five days had passed since we’d arrived in Great Keith...and Sasa hit level 99.



“Hi, Mako! Well done on getting Aya to level 99,” Eir cheered, smiling and waving.

I sighed.

“Thank you, Eir.”

Did she spend *all* of her time in the Seafloor Temple? This was Noah’s space, and the goddess in question had an odd look on her face as she stood at her compatriot’s side.

“What’s wrong, Noah?” I asked.

“The other goddesses are getting interested in you as well.”

I couldn't understand what she meant for a moment and struggled for an answer. The other goddesses?

"Well, you defeating Bifrons settled it. Althena and Sól are interested in you now. Nice going, Mako!"

"You ratted him out! Why would you do that?" Noah demanded with a glare.

"Come on, Noah, calm down. They're just keeping an eye on him."

I paused. "Is that...okay?"

Noah was treated as a wicked deity in this world. Being both her apostle *and* under observation made me think the inquisition was going to come knocking on my door.

"Well, you're on the same side now, so it's probably fine."

"Despite that, Sól's hero certainly seemed eager to attack me," I pointed out.

"Hmmm, that's just her personality...and the will of Great Keith's brass," Eir explained. "Attacking you was not something Sól told her to do."

So Princess Sophia was right.

But that wasn't good either. They might even try something in the tournament...

"Hrmm, I doubt that, Makoto."

"Yeah, Mako. Sól's the goddess of war, but she's really earnest and hates subterfuge."

"Oooh." *That* certainly sounded good. Sasa would never manage to win if Great Keith interfered with the tournament, but it seemed like things would be run fairly.

Eir snickered. "Can she even win, though?"

"You're a nasty one," Noah snapped. "Makoto came to us because he's got something to ask. Right?"

"Right." Seems like the goddesses had seen through my intentions.

The party had all talked today when Sasa hit level 99. Even though she was

much stronger now, she still didn't think she'd be able to win against Olga. At this point, what could we even do?

Eir chuckled. "Olga's level 99 too. She's a battle maniac, after all."

"That's not all," added Noah. "She can convert heat into aura. It's just like how the Hero of Light can convert sunlight to bolster and strengthen his aura—the hotter it is, the more powerful she becomes. She's got the definite home-field advantage in Great Keith."

Their explanations made our situation seem even more ridiculous and daunting.

"Then we've got no other choice..." I muttered.

I recalled something else that we'd figured out during the party conversation earlier.

It was Fujiyan who pointed it out—Sasa had several unique skills, including *Action Game Player*, *Transform*, and...

Evolution.

Those were the skills listed in Sasa's Soul Book.

We could pretty much guess what would happen. After all, it was an evolution—just like a lowly Magikarp evolving into a mighty Gyarados, Sasa's skill should make her stronger as well.

"The problem is that you don't know how it'll affect you," I said to Sasa.

"Yup. Even Fujiyan and Princess Sophia don't know anything. Lucy and Furiae had no idea either," she replied.

Monsters were mysterious to begin with, and though she'd been human once, Sasa was technically a monster in this world. We'd looked into her abilities, but unfortunately, the adventurer's guild and the library had no information about *Evolution*.

I was brought back to the present by Eir.

“Okay, Mako?” she asked. “So, *Evolution* needs an item—”

“Ah bah bah! Quiet.” Noah cut her off. “He came to see me!”

“Guys, please don’t fight.” We weren’t getting anywhere! I needed to know.

“Okay. Makoto, listen up.” Noah raised her finger and started lecturing.

“*Evolution* requires magicite. If you use a piece containing mana from a particularly strong monster, she’ll be able to evolve.”

“Magicite...”

I fumbled around in my pocket and pulled out the red magicite I’d collected after defeating Bifrons. Could I use this?

“Nope, not happening!” Eir exclaimed, grabbing onto me from behind.

“Whoa!” She’d been in front of me a minute ago.

“Not that,” Noah told me. “Use the stone from the lamia queen you got in Labyrinthos.”

“Uh, but...”

“‘*Surely, this one is much stronger?*’” Eir must have read my mind because she whispered my thoughts into my ear.

“If you use that, you’ll turn Aya into a demon lord,” Noah explained calmly.

“And then you’ll have to take her out,” Eir added with a giggle.

“Wha?”

What the hell?!

“Well, that result isn’t totally set in stone,” Noah said, “but a demon lord’s magicite is too strong. You shouldn’t let her use it.”

“Right,” Eir agreed. “If things go bad, her personality might change.”

“S-So it could fail?” I hadn’t even thought of that possibility.

“Well, if you give a lamia the lamia queen’s magicite, it won’t fail,” Noah told me. “They’re the same race after all.”

I sighed. “Phew, that’s a relief.”

“Do you know how to use it?” Eir whispered into my ear.

Guess she was being friendly now. “No. How does it work?”

“The timing is the first thing to take into account. Midnight is best. *Evolution* is a skill that allows you to discard your old self and be born anew. The ceremony should take place when the world is full of death—in the depths of night.”

“Also,” Noah interjected, “she needs to purify her body as much as she can. And wear as little as possible. The main thing is to be ‘as you were born.’”

I listened carefully so I wouldn’t forget anything. “I see. Thanks for the info.”



“Then,” Noah continued, “once everything’s ready, she needs to eat the magicite.”

“E-Eat it?!”

“Yep. If she’s not in a position to evolve, then the mana will engulf her,” Eir warned. “But, Aya’s definitely ready to accept it.”

Noah nodded. “She’s maxed-out her level, so she’ll make a great lamia queen.”

I chewed over their words—the method, the conditions, and the item.

Okay, got it. Now I could tell Sasa how her skill worked.

“Thank you, Noah, Eir,” I said with a deep bow. While I had my head down, I realized something.

If I were to eat the demon lord’s magicite that’s in my hand...

“You’re welcome... But, Makoto, you won’t evolve even if you hit level 99 and eat it.” Noah scoffed.

“You want to be a demon lord?” Eir asked at the same time.

Yeah, they were reading my mind again.

“I guess not.” A joke! Just a joke. I didn’t even have the *Evolution* skill...unfortunately.

“Nooooaaah, Mako just naturally jumps straight to the riskiest stuff.”

“He’s just like that,” Noah replied. “Makoto, if you eat that, your body won’t stand up to the huge amounts of mana. You’ll die. Don’t you dare.”

“R-Right...” I’d die? Man, I had this rare item and no way to use it...

Eir sighed. “I sure am glad I’ve got him under observation. He’s always causing problems.”

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Noah and I looked at her in unison.

“Oops.”

“What was that, Eir?” Noah asked.

“Did you just say observation?”

Eir giggled and smacked her head. She was wearing a cute, awkward expression, but now really wasn't the time for that!

“You haven't noticed, Noah? That's why I'm here.”

Noah's lip curled in displeasure.

“Well, kinda. Originally, it was probably Althena's suggestion,” she said, casually dropping the head goddess's name. “But, it was actually Ira who told us to be careful of Makoto's party. She's shut herself away, but she definitely said we should keep an eye on your disciple and the Priestess of the Moon...”

“And that's essentially...his party,” Noah said flatly.

I was silent. My heart stirred with disquieted feelings.

Ira, the goddess with the ability to see this world's future, had prompted the Sacred Deities to observe us. Why was she concerned about our party?

“Mako and Furiae are good kids, though. Even if Mako can be a bit dangerous.” Eir smiled with a completely innocent air. She could be a bit wicked sometimes, but she was so kind.

“You're getting taken in,” Noah interjected, snapping me out of my train of thought. “There isn't any such thing as a *nice* goddess.”

“You meanie. Look at how kind I ammmm.”

I sighed. Well, Eir *was* kind. She always helped me.

Oh, right, I need to ask about something else.

“Noah, Eir. Are there really *no* water elementals in Great Keith?”

“That's right, so don't push yourself.” Noah stressed.

“Yeah, Mako, you're a shrimp there.”

So harsh! I mean, it was true... But still!

“That's why I had a thought...” I said, before launching into an idea I'd had

about how to fight.

When I finished, their expressions sure were a sight to see—they looked like they were watching a crazy person.

“Mako! If you’re going to do that, you should just convert to me! I’ll give you *Water Magic (Saint Rank)*!”

“Nope, Eir. This is how he always is,” Noah said with a sigh.

“No way! That’s just suicide! Roses doesn’t support suicide!”

“He’s done stuff like this over and over. Remember when he synchro’d with someone who had incompatible magic? King rank fire! Almost burned him alive! And then there was the time he tried to control Undyne with only about 200 magic mastery. Makoto’s sanity meters are broken.”

“Noah, you don’t need to put it that way!” I protested. Was it really *that* bad an idea?

“Yes. It’s out of the question,” Eir stated. “You’ll make Sophie cry.”

“He’ll do it anyway,” said Noah.

She really does understand me...

“I’m still telling you not to!” Noah yelled, giving me a firm smack to the head.

In the end, they *did* give me a few pointers on my idea...but they were still completely against it.

And I thought it was such a good plan...



The next morning, we all gathered for breakfast. I’d spoken with the goddesses for too long, so I hadn’t gotten much sleep.

I’m still kinda tired...

But we had things to do, and we spent the meal discussing our upcoming plans. Fujiyan was working on information gathering about Kawakita’s “buyer” but hadn’t found anything particularly helpful. We did know that she was being held in the town’s slave market—a place under strict guard.

Kawakita had a rare skill, so she was being treated fairly well. The main problem was that there were only a few days until the next auction.

“Fujiyan, is there anything I can help with?” I asked.

“Let me see... If I can think of anything, then I shall make you aware forthwith.” That answer was the same one he’d given me a few days ago. His face was grave. He was really struggling, and I hated not being able to help.

We spent the rest of the meal just chatting and then sat around drinking some tea.

Oh, right. I need to tell Sasa about the Evolution skill. I picked at the cookies that’d been served with the tea, took a sip from my cup, then turned to Sasa.

“Mind coming to my room tonight, Sasa? At around eleven?”

“Huh? S-Sure, I don’t mind.”

Midnight was the best time for it, so I figured we should start getting ready a bit before that.

Silence consumed the room as Lucy and Princess Sophia’s gazes locked onto me. They looked like they wanted to say something, but they didn’t speak. I was kinda curious, but *Evolution* was more important right now.

“Make sure you have a proper bath and wear the thinnest clothes you have,” I continued.

“Wha?!” Sasa exclaimed in shock.

Well, Noah had said that for *Evolution* to work, you should be “as you were born.”

The gazes from the other two grew heavier. Furiae seemed uninterested and was playing with Twi. My brain still wasn’t working properly from the lack of sleep, but I needed to make sure I relayed all the information I remembered.

“U-Umm, Takatsuki? You want me to have a bath and come to your room without wearing much? What’re you gonna do then?” Sasa shifted, peering up at me.

Huh... Maybe she’d forgotten about the skill?

“Well, the ceremony, of course.”

“C-Ceremony?!”

Why was she so surprised about it? We’d been talking about it for a while.

“O-Okay. It’s my first time, but I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it.” How strong would she end up?

“I might be a bit nervous...” she said, her cheeks flushing red.

“Don’t worry. Just leave it to me.” After all, the goddesses had assured me that we couldn’t fail.

“Be gentle...okay?”

“Of...course?” I was just going to tell her what needed to be done. What about *that* needed to be gentle?

“M-Mister Takatsuki’h,” stammered Nina. “You should be alone for this kind of conversation’h...”

Furiae leveled me with an icy glare. “What do you think you’re doing? Talking like this first thing in the morning?!” Next to her, Lucy and Sasa’s mouths opened and closed mutely.

Hm? Uh... Had I said something odd?

“My esteemed Tackie... Everything you have said for the past while has been odd. Why not wash up and wake up?”

I guess his *Mind Reading* had enabled him to understand everything, so he just offered me some calm support. And in the end, the misunderstandings were corrected.

◇ The Next Day ◇

“How do you feel, Sasa?”

She’d completed the ceremony and had managed to evolve into a lamia queen. By the way, I hadn’t been able to witness it—Lucy and Nina had been the ones with her.

Damn it! I wanted to see!

Hahhhh, Makoto... Noah said, sounding exasperated. *You don't understand women.*

Poor Sophie, lamented Eir.

What's that about, goddesses?

"I feel kinda sluggish..." Sasa told me. "I think I'll just sleep today..."

"Maybe we should get a doctor to take a look?" I suggested.

Sasa was currently in her lamia form. She hadn't looked like this for quite a while, but she was now a monster, flopped out on the bed. Her snake tail dangled over the edge.

"Aya, are you okay?" Lucy asked worriedly.

"My healing magic is having no effect..." Princess Sophia informed us.

"She doesn't seem pale and her mana is flowing well," Furiae observed.

"From my perspective, there are no issues. If anything, she seems as strong as an average dragon."

So Furiae thought she was *that* strong...

"*Evolution* affected her level—it has reset from 99 to 1," Fujiyan explained.

"Her body is likely confused by the sudden change. I believe she would be best served by resting."

"Right, got it. As for a doctor, I'd prefer to find one we can trust to be discreet and keep their mouth shut..."

"Worry not'h! We have already made the preparations'h!"

That was Nina and Fujiyan for you—always perfectly on the ball.

"Do you want anything?" Lucy asked Sasa.

"Hmmmm, something sweet..."

"I'll go peel you some fruit."

"Yayyy."

Lucy was looking after her. I wasn't going to be of any use.

Suddenly, the geezer guardian knight ran up to us. "Lady Sophia, you have a

guest!” he exclaimed.

“Turn them away,” she replied bluntly.

“Th-That isn’t—”

“I’m coming in, Sophia.”

The man was cut off. In walked a tan girl wearing what looked like dancer’s clothes. Her accessories and shoes were obviously expensive. Two brawny-looking fighters were standing behind her.

Bodyguards? Is she a noble? I wondered. Her words showed no deference or respect to Princess Sophia, so she definitely wasn’t a normal person.

“Dahlia. Showing up with no preamble...” Sophia looked slightly lost, but she moved to talk to the woman.

Dahlia... I remembered that name.

This was the Priestess of Fire: Dahlia Sól Great Keith.

So this is their priestess. She *did* have the same refined air as Princess Sophia.

Just then, I suddenly remembered something. *Ack! Sasa is still in her lamia form!*

I “looked” behind me with *RPG Player* and saw Lucy had covered Sasa’s lower half with a blanket.

Nice one!

“Oh my, is that the warrior who will be participating in the tournament?” Dahlia said, her eyes trained on Sasa. She then turned to me. “You must be Sophia’s fiancé, Makoto, the Hero of Roses. I apologize for my guardian knight’s rudeness toward you. Would you pardon it?”

Though her words were polite, the apology definitely didn’t feel sincere. Her guardian knight was Olga Sól Talisker—aka the Hero of Incandescence. In other words, Dahlia was protected by the battle-crazed hero who had attacked us. Apparently, Olga and Dahlia were childhood friends, and their looks boosted their popularity in Great Keith. They were almost like idols here.

Maybe Dahlia was the one who incited Olga...? Just because they *looked* nice

didn't mean they *were* nice. It definitely felt like "blackhearted" was the more appropriate description for the pair.

"Nice to meet you," I said in response. "I'm Makoto Takatsuki."

"I am indeed glad to make your acquaintance. The heat here may be slightly harder to deal with than in Roses, but I hope you can relax in Great Keith."

As she spoke, she gripped my hand tightly.

She's so close...

However, what I felt in response was less like my heart skipping a beat and more like a chill crawling up my spine. Dahlia seemed like she was appraising me, like a merchant looking at potential wares.

Would I end up being trash or treasure in her eyes?

"Dahlia, get away from him," snapped Princess Sophia. "If you have business, I will deal with you."

"Oh, but I wanted to speak with Hero Makoto for a little longer," Dahlia replied.

"No."

"Harsh. Still, it's been a while—I wanted to talk with you as well."

At that, the two of them vanished into another room.

The new priestess seemed to act similar to royalty. Therefore, a royal should be the one dealing with her. Horses for courses, I suppose.

I'll leave Princess Sophia to it.

Lucy was looking after Sasa, and Sophia had taken away our sudden guest. I was just thinking about what to do with my time when I saw someone strolling toward the exit.

"Princess? Where are you going?"

"For a walk," Furiae replied. She carried Twi on her shoulder as she headed for the door.

I remembered Eir's warning—the Sacred Deities were keeping an eye on her.

Ira had specifically warned against the moon priestess, so it felt dangerous to let her wander around alone.

“I’ll come with you,” I offered.

“Hm, that’s rare. I suppose you *are* my guardian knight. *Aren’t* you?”

“It’s dangerous to go alone.”

“Hah.” She huffed out a laugh. “I can just charm foes and run.”

Even so, she didn’t refuse when I left alongside her.

“It’s hot,” she complained a little way into our walk.

“Well, it’s a warm climate,” I replied.

“Use the water elementals to cool me down.”

“There aren’t any.” Seriously, none of them, wherever I looked. Great Keith was tough.

Despite her griping, she seemed to be enjoying herself. She was humming away as she curiously browsed items in the shops.

“Want to buy something?” I asked. She was staring with interest at some clothes in a stall.

“What?!” she exclaimed, looking aghast. “You want me to wear something that exposing in front of you? You pervert!”

I suppose the clothing in this country was rather different from her usual attire. Still, she had to be even hotter wearing a long black dress. A lot of the fashion in Great Keith showed a lot of skin—it was just the type of clothing Lucy preferred.

“Besides,” she continued, “if I walked around wearing this, I’d end up charming every man that saw me. That’s not fair to the girls, is it? You get it, right?” She chuckled, flipping her hair with a smug look. Her gestures were high-handed, but they looked really good coming from her.

A while later, she suddenly announced that she was hungry.

Well, it’s around midday—about time for another meal. The various

restaurants seemed to be getting ready for the lunch rush.

“Let’s go there,” she suggested, pointing.

“Sure.”

We headed into a place at random. Our order consisted of a spicy soup and some crunchy bread. It came with a sweet drink, similar to coconut milk. I also asked for some grilled fish for Twi.

“This definitely has a strange taste,” Furiae remarked, but she seemed to be enjoying the meal nonetheless.

To me, though, this flavor was very familiar.

“It’s like curry,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Food from my old world. In my country, we all grew up on curry.”

“This must be nostalgic then.”

It certainly was. Being whisked away to a new world had come with a whole host of issues, but I was happy the food was nice.

I’ll have to bring Fujiyan and Sasa to this place, I decided as we ate.

Furiae let out a sigh. “I feel a little sleepy,” she said, propping her chin in her hand and beginning to nod off. Before long I could hear her breathing soften. Twi had curled up next to her and was passed out as well.

Have we tired her out? I guess we’d dragged her along for Sasa’s leveling.
Thanks, Furiae.

I decided to let her rest and just waited for her to wake up.

She’d been sleeping for around half an hour before she suddenly startled awake.

Her eyes were wide and a bead of sweat trickled down her cheek. It was the first time I’d seen her lose her usual composure—she looked scared.

“Princess? What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer immediately but peered suspiciously around the area.

“Listen to me,” she urged, grabbing my hair and yanking my ear toward her lips. “My knight...” she whispered. “The capital will be destroyed...”

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Learns of a Disastrous Future

◇ Furiae Naya Laphroaig's Perspective ◇

This was the first time I had visited Great Keith, and I walked around the city feeling relaxed. The sun was harsh and a hot breeze caressed my cheeks. My clothes clung to me with sweat, but despite the uncomfortable feeling of being out of place, I was having fun. People wore bright smiles, and the streets were filled with noise. It was a different atmosphere than either Roses or Springrogue.

Everyone's...so carefree.

Once, back in the underground ruins of Laphroaig, I'd been told about what the *other* countries were like. How they weren't shrouded in perpetual darkness like our home—how they were bright and constantly covered with brilliant sunshine.

I couldn't help but compare this place to the memories of my own experiences in Laphroaig.

Back then, we'd sat in the gloom, eating whatever we could scrounge together. I recalled fleeing the Temple Knights over and over, time after time.

The world isn't fair.

I knew that all too well.

It doesn't matter. I'll live on alone...

I brushed the dark feelings aside. This was the first time I'd been in Great Keith, so I figured I should enjoy my visit more. The people around me certainly were.

"H-Hey, look."

"Man, she's hot."

“Maybe she’s a foreign noble?”

“She’s only got one guard though.”

“Maybe he’s stupid-strong?”

“He...doesn’t seem like it. Looks as if a stiff breeze’d do him in.”

Those were the conversations I could hear around me. I was used to the men’s gazes, so I turned to look behind me instead.

My knight was peering with interest at the various wares on offer. Though he was supposed to be a hero, normal people thought he looked weak. He didn’t even seem bothered after getting beaten to a pulp by that other hero out of nowhere.

Doesn’t he care?

That brought back memories of Springrogue and the high-rank demon who’d attacked us—Sciulli. Makoto Takatsuki had commanded angels to eat her just as one might squash a bug...with no care at all. Just remembering it made me shudder.

It’s difficult to tell what he’s thinking...

Even now, he seemed to be training practically without sleep, so maybe his loss *did* bother him. Although, according to him, there weren’t any water elementals in the country. Would he be okay?

I was drawn from my pondering when I realized that my stomach was empty.

“Let’s go there,” I suggested. We entered the fairly empty establishment and had a meal together. In the beginning, I was slightly taken aback by the taste of the food, but it *was* good. Once I’d finished the sweet dessert, I let out a soft sigh.

What were the mage and warrior doing now? I was glad Aya had managed to evolve. Hunting those lizards every day had been a chore. Maybe the daily attempts had worn on me because before I knew it, I found myself asleep.

Dreaming.

People were screaming. The tang of blood caught in my nose. Dust hung in the air, darkening the area. Vexingly enough, this felt almost nostalgic—it was just like Laphroaig.

I realized I was standing amidst rubble.

Gamelan, the city I'd just been walking through, was utterly destroyed. Arms and legs poked from the rubble, all of them twisted unnaturally, crushed, and stained red. They were all dead...corpses as far as I could see.

The place I'd been shopping and eating was a charnel ground.

"Guh!" I gasped, waking up.

Damn it.

My *Future Sight* had activated again. The vision I'd just received was a premonition of the near future. Plus, being a necromancer, I could see death. I lifted my head off the table and scanned my surroundings, from the seat on the terrace to the people walking by.

Ugh...I feel sick...

They'd been enjoying themselves moments ago, but now...all I could see was pain and resentment. One person's arm was bent unnaturally, another had lost a leg, and worse still was the one missing their head entirely. I just couldn't enjoy the town anymore.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It was all an illusion.

"Argh! This is the worst!" I complained. I couldn't discern whether the people walking the town were alive or dead. The mixture of *Future Sight* and *Necromancy* meant that all I could see was corpse after corpse.

"Princess?" called out a nearby voice.

I hadn't even dared to look his way. After all, I worried I might see my knight's cadaver, and I didn't want to see an acquaintance dead.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I peeked.

He's the same as ever...

My knight, Makoto Takatsuki, was completely unchanged. He was just staring at me worriedly from amidst the death, his face as dull as ever.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"My knight, we need to get out of the country!"

"What?"

"Just do it! Back to the inn—we can take the mage and warrior and get out of here."

"Wh-Whoa, hold up. What's going on?"

Furiae had lost her cool out of nowhere. She wanted to leave Great Keith. As I calmed her down, she told me the context.

It boiled down to four things:

She'd seen the people of Great Keith dying in the near future.

The cause was unknown.

Whether I'd get caught up in it was also unknown.

Staying in Great Keith was still dangerous.

"Princess, let's talk it through with Sophia first."

There was a long pause.

"Fine. But we need to leave soon."

"Okay."

After that, we headed back to the inn where Princess Sophia was waiting. Fortunately, the fire priestess had already left, so Furiae was able to explain what she'd seen. After hearing about the vision, Sophia's expression was conflicted, but she soon seemed to come to a decision.

"There are people in Great Keith who possess *Future Sight*, so I find it hard to believe that they have made no preparations... Still, I shall inform them, just to be sure."

"Through the priestess?" I asked. If that was the case, we couldn't go after her.

“No, I believe the military would be a better avenue. You should come with me. I will introduce you to the general.”

“Got it.”

All this time, Sasa still hadn’t woken up. I could hear her breathing softly. Lucy was supposed to be looking after her, but she was sharing the bed and also sleeping. They sure were getting along.

I noticed that Twi was with them too, curled up in a ball. She was the same as ever, huh?

With a course of action decided, I followed the princess to the castle.

It was the first time I’d seen a palace quite like this—unlike the grand beauty of Highland’s castle, and the reserved elegance of Roses’s, it was, in a word, a stronghold. The walls towered above us and were made out of a thick material similar to concrete. As we entered, everyone around us was clad in armor. They were all tall and walking in formation. When they looked at us—or more accurately, at Princess Sophia—they’d always salute.

I can’t settle down here...

The two of us, plus Princess Sophia’s guards, were guided farther inside to a big room—not the audience chamber that we’d been initially greeted in. Right in the middle of the room was a bearded man. As we approached and he saw the princess, the man rose from his chair.

“Princess Sophia. It is an honor you would come all this way.”

“General Talisker. Thank you for accommodating us on such short notice.”

This man—General Talisker—was the one responsible for the country’s army as a whole.

“It is good to meet you, Hero of Roses. I am Talisker, and I command the army of Great Keith.”

“Likewise. I am Makoto Takatsuki,” I replied, giving a bow like Princess Sophia had taught me.

I’d heard several things about this man before. Notably, he was the father of

the Hero of Incandescence, Olga Sól Talisker. He was also the person most likely to have spurred her on.

“What is your business here today?” he asked. “Urgent information, I presume?”

“Indeed. One of our group reported an instance of *Future Sight* warning of a risk to the country.”

“Hmm...” The only change to his expression was a slight movement of his eyebrows. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.



“Am I to presume that this warning comes from the moon priestess in the Hero of Roses’s party?”

The princess’s breath caught slightly. She’d been found out. Well, he was in charge of the army—he’d surely have intel operatives.

“Is there a need to answer that?” the princess asked after a pause.

“Not at all. Your response is sufficient.”

Sophia, that was essentially a “yes.”

The other men in the room didn’t say a word; they probably wouldn’t until the general told them to. Still, the moment Furiae’s title left the general’s lips, some of them began looking slightly hostile.

We...might not be very welcome here.

“My thanks for your report, Princess Sophia. The upcoming tournament means we have more people in the capital than is normal. The alert level will be raised.”

The princess paused again. “I see. Then we shall take our leave,” she said, cutting the conversation short. She didn’t seem to want to stick around.

I went to follow as she left, only to be stopped by a voice behind me.

“Hero Makoto. I should apologize for my daughter.”

“Not at all,” I replied. “She was as strong as I’d expect from Great Keith’s hero.”

“Truly, she never listens or rests.”

Should I disagree? Was he trying to imply that the attack hadn’t been his idea?

I can’t tell.

There was no point worrying about it, so the princess and I left the castle.

Once we were back and had eaten, I spent the night training in my room. Furiae had said she wasn’t feeling well—she’d shut herself away. I’d gone to check on her, but she’d told me to leave. I also hadn’t seen Sasa or Lucy since

I'd returned.

So, I conjured a little mouse with water magic and spent the time playing with Twi.

Suddenly, there was a knock at my door, and Sasa called out, "Takatsuki."

What the...?

As she stepped into my room, it felt like I'd been blasted by a gust of wind.

"Are you free?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah...sure," I answered, awed by her presence. She hadn't changed at all in looks and still seemed to be the same human girl. According to Fujiyan, she was back at level one. Despite that, being near her felt like standing in front of a demon lord or ancient dragon. It was weird...like she was just...more. Was this the result of her evolution?

"What's with that look, Takatsuki?"

"Doesn't matter. Where's Lucy?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Well, Fuu seems down, so she went to go check on her."

"Right... Furiae has been a bit off since lunch." She'd said that *Future Sight* used a lot of mental strength, so she was tired. I'd notice how pale she was, so I felt pretty worried.

Sasa then grabbed my hand, and I felt a chill.

"Hey, let's go out," she said with a teasing grin.

All of a sudden, she yanked on my arm...and pulled me out of the window.

Hey! This is the third floor!!!

The two of us whistled through the air.

"Woow," Sasa gushed. "So this is what it looks like from up here."

"There are a lot of buildings," I commented. "Well, it *is* like the continent's second most important city."

The two of us were currently flying through the air above Gamelan, and

Sasa...had transformed into a *harpy*.

"I thought you hated harpies?" I asked. The lamiae and harpies had been bitter enemies in Labyrinthos, so it felt odd to see her in that form.

"Yeah...but I fought them so much that it's easy to transform into one," she replied with a bitter grin.

Maybe the memories had faded a little... That could only be a good thing.

"So, where are we going?" I asked.

"What? On a date, obviously. You went on one with Fuu earlier, so let's take a walk."

A date...

I looked at my old school friend's face—her expression was serious. It looked like she was searching for something...and aiming for a goal.

"What's that big building?" Sasa asked, the question pulling me back to earth.

"Um, the Colosseum. It's where they're holding the tournament."

"Hmm, so it's like a big stadium..."

"Want to go look?" I asked. Sasa was entering the tournament, so it wouldn't hurt to check the place out first.

"Nah, not today," she replied.

So that wasn't her goal. In which case...

"Is *that* what you're looking for?" I pointed, and she looked in that direction.

"What's with all the tents?" she asked.

The area was a big empty space containing several large tents. They were about the same size as the circus tent we'd seen in Roses, but there were dozens of them, making for a rather strange sight. Fujiyan had once told me what was within them.

"That's the slave market, Sasa. The biggest place for trading in slaves in the country."

"The slave market..." Her eyes took on a dangerous glint.

So...she is after Kawakita.

According to Fujiyan, he had not managed to find out anything useful about Kawakita's would-be buyer. And now, there were only a few days left until the auction.

Sasa turned to me with a serious expression. "Say, Takatsuki. Shall we make a detour?"

Will you head for the slave market?

► **Yes**

No

So here comes the choice.

There was something here. We might've been stepping into a lion's den, but Sasa was the person asking.

"Let's go say hi to Kawakita," I decided.

"Thanks!" Sasa was suddenly overjoyed.

"We should do it cleverly though," I added.

She looked puzzled for a moment, and I explained my idea.



"Hey, does this work?" Sasa asked, shifting her large frame uncomfortably. "I kinda don't like it."

"Well, you'll fit right in at the slave market," I told her.

Sasa was disguised as a rotund, rich-looking woman with a showy dress and massively jeweled accessories—the very image of someone who'd married into money.

I was playing the role of her attendant with a *Transformation* of my own. Well, actually, all I'd done was let my hair grow longer at the front—faceless protagonist style.

Though we were disguised, it bears mentioning that *Transformation* functioned differently for us both. Sasa was a lamia, a race proficient with *Transformation*. They'd morph into humans, deceive other humans, and then eat them...which was a rather scary use of the skill. Sasa's unique skill set allowed her to keep *Transformation* up 24/7.

On the other hand, I had acquired the skill through training, so I could only use it for an hour. I couldn't change into just *anything* either. For example, I couldn't turn into a harpy and fly like Sasa. And since today I would be keeping up *Transformation* for a long time, I'd just changed the front of my hair.

"Did we really need to disguise ourselves?" Sasa asked.

"Yup. The military has investigated us, so they would hear about it if we came as ourselves." The general even knew about Furiae being the moon priestess. There were a lot of soldiers here as guards, so I didn't want to be recognized.

"It'll make it harder if we have to kidnap Kawakita as a last resort," I murmured.

She looked surprised for a moment then leered at me. "You're a bad man, Takatsuki."

"It's the *last* resort. I'd like to avoid it if we can." It was a crime, after all.

"Then let's go!"

We exchanged nods and passed through the entrance. We were stopped before heading into the market, but handing over a pile of chips got us in.

Fujiyan had already explained the way things worked here. Inside, the area was unexpectedly clean and lively. The main product was, obviously, slaves, but there were also places to gamble and such. The most popular kind of slave in the country were the fighters.

With Great Keith being a military country, it was sometimes called the "martial country," so strong individuals garnered respect. A skilled warrior—even if they were a slave—was treated fairly well here. There were people without any skills besides fighting who would find themselves a master that would pay well, and then sell themselves off. It meant that strong slaves were both prized and expensive.

As for how to tell which slaves were strong... Well, the Soul Book listed their skills and stats, but the quickest way to find out was to get them to fight. There were several simple rings around the market where the slaves could battle one another.

Taking wagers on the fights was just capitalism at its finest.

There *were* clerics on hand for healing, so some safety procedures had been implemented...despite the general lack of civility that this concept had in the first place. And though the phrase “slave market” brought something dark to mind, this area was actually full of excitement.

“Wow, Takatsuki. Those slave girls are fighting.”

“It looks like there’re different divisions depending on gender and build.”

Was it to make sure things were fair? These fights seemed more like a sport at this point. At the same time, only the warriors were fighting, not the mages. Apparently, mages were judged solely by their Soul Books. That was for a simple reason—mages fighting in town could cause far too much damage.

“Who do you think will win?” Sasa wondered.

“Hmm, an amazonsess and a beastgirl. They’re both pretty strong.”

I guess while we’re here, we’re spectating... The first fighter was a tanned, lean woman, and the other looked like she had tiger ears. They seemed pretty evenly matched, so I couldn’t discern anything except for the fact that they were strong.

Maybe as strong as Nina...?

“I wonder if I could join in...” Sasa murmured ominously. “If they’re that strong...”

Whoa there, Sasa. We can’t stand out like that.

I turned to say just that, but there was a sudden ringing in the air. A moment later, I realized it was coming from Sasa. The two fighters suddenly stopped and looked at us—Sasa specifically—in shock.

And it wasn’t just those two—all of the fighters had looked. Fortunately, the spectators hadn’t noticed.

“Sasa, we need to get out of here,” I hissed.

“Whuh? Uh, right.”

We hurried away and ended up at a spring in the middle of the area. It was almost like an oasis. Trader carts were lined up, and their horses were drinking from the water. I caught some glimpses of water elementals as well.

“Ugh, that was bad...”

“S-Sorry, Takatsuki,” Sasa apologized as we caught our breath. She was in her normal human form now.

“Be more careful next time. Did you accidentally use your *Menace* skill?” The shock on those fighters’ faces had definitely been weird. They’d looked like deer frozen in the headlights.

She grumbled. “I didn’t mean to...”

Maybe it was because she wasn’t yet used to the evolution. She’d just have to take it steady.

So, with that crisis averted, I decided to cheer her up. “Sasa, look over there! Our goal’s in sight.”

“What?”

There was a much bigger tent on the other side of the spring. Many people were standing guard at the entrance.

“I used *Listen* to check it out,” I said. “That’s where the big earners are being sold.”

“So that’s where Keiko is...”

“Hold up, Sasa,” I panicked as she started to emit even more waves of hostility than earlier. “Right...why don’t we just head back...”

“What?! After we came this far?!” she demanded, whirling to look at me.

“We’ll come back in the middle of the night. We now have an idea of how the guards are situated, so we need to get ready to sneak in.”

We could ask Furiae to help as well. There was a lot to do.

Sasa stared back at me, her expression perplexed. “You seem like you’re having fun.”

“Hey, Sasa, look me in the eye. I’m dead serious.”

“Whatever.” She laughed.

Why?

“I want to nap in your room then,” she added.

Hold on! You’ve got a room of your own.

And so, we headed back to the inn and started our preparations.

◇ Later That Night ◇

The bustle of the slave market had completely died out. There were, however, still plenty of guards, so we couldn’t be careless.

Sasa had transformed into a harpy—she was flying through the sky, taking us toward the big tent.

We’re exposed like this though. We’ll be spotted.

“Water Magic: Mist.”

I borrowed some mana from the meager water elementals in the area and covered our vicinity in fog. I would’ve preferred to cloak the whole slave market, but there weren’t enough elementals, so not enough mana for that much magic. While Great Keith was a desert, it *did* get bouts of rolling fog from the distant sea. This weather pattern was called a rolling mist, and it occurred about once a week.

“We can’t take it easy. Let’s go, Sasa.”

“Right. *Stealth* is perfect.”

Sasa and I quietly landed near the tent.

Then, I took out a special item I’d had Furiae make. It looked like a perfume bottle and just contained water. However, the moon priestess’s curse had transformed it into something really nasty.

It had been imbued with *Slumber* and *Forgetfulness*.

I used water magic to spread the cursed water throughout the fog. Before long, the guards were all asleep. And, even if they did wake up, they wouldn't remember the last few hours.

Once we arrived at the large enchanted tent, I took out my dagger, sliced through the fabric, and we slipped inside.

There were guards inside as well, but they'd all been put to sleep by the fog. Sasa and I crept farther in using *Stealth*. In the center of the space, we found a girl in a lavish cell. All the furniture was luxurious...especially considering the fact that she was a slave. If it weren't for the cell itself, the area would just look like an expensive hotel room.

Because of the late hour, the girl inside was sleeping, but I recognized her face. The last time we'd met was at the Water Temple. She was one of my classmates from high school.

"Keiko!" Sasa cried quietly.

The girl rubbed sleepily at her eyes and stretched. She'd been blonde when we'd spoken at the temple, but her hair was now back to its natural black color. The strong-willed impression searing from her now open eyes hadn't changed at all.

"Huh...Aya? No way... I've got to be dreaming."

"No, it's me, Keiko! It's really me! I came to see you."

"Wha? No way! Really?!" Her eyes flew fully open as she ran over toward us. There was an intricate and complicated collar fastened around her neck.

So that's the slave collar...

Slavers were the only ones who could remove them, and the method was fiercely guarded. These collars were ridiculously expensive as well, so they were only used on valuable slaves.

Well, Fujiyan did say she was the most expensive slave in the auction.

She was an otherworlder who had the *High Wizard* skill. She was also a former classmate of the Hero of Light. On top of that, she was attractive, so the nobles would probably be drooling over her.

“You’re okay, Aya? You weren’t at the Water Temple when we all arrived.”

“Uh...” Sasa fumbled for a second. “Well, I got blown off course. Takatsuki found me.”

That prompted Kawakita to look my way.

“Oh, you’re Takatsuki? Hmmm. You’ve changed.” She grinned.

“H-Hey. It’s been a while, Kawakita.” I tried to play it cool...but tripped over my tongue.

“Nice, Aya. At least in this world, you managed to snag the guy you like.”

“Hey! Keiko!” Sasa protested.

“G-Guys, keep it down.” This definitely wasn’t the time for catching up.

They both apologized in unison and fell quiet.

“We’ll rescue you soon, Keiko,” Sasa said. She’d grown quiet, and her fist was clenched tight.

Kawakita’s reaction wasn’t particularly enthused. “Ah, right. Michio came and said the same...”

Michio Fujiwara was Fujiyan’s full name. He’d said that Kawakita was a childhood friend of his, so it made sense that she’d call him by his first name.

“Honestly, it’s my own fault I ended up as a slave.” Her tone seemed indifferent. “Plus, the guy who’s going to buy me is pretty influential...so you don’t need to push yourselves too hard.”

“N-No! I can’t leave you like this!”

“Well, I never would have considered it in Japan. But we were all treated pretty well once we got to this world, so we got carried away. Then, before I knew it, I fell into gambling and racked up a huge debt. That’s how I ended up like this.” She gave a small derisive snort.

Ah, so she had to sell herself because of gambling... Fujiyan had talked around that detail.

“What about your boyfriend Okada? He didn’t try to help?!”

“Him? No, we broke up ages ago. He just kept cheating since being an otherworlder attracts tons of women. They were all over him! The hell kinda harem was he trying to pull?! All the guys that go for that should be shot!”

Kawakita, quiet!

“Takatsuki seems all right, so you probably don’t need to worry...but make sure you pay attention,” Kawakita advised seriously, putting her hand on Sasa’s shoulder.

“U-Uhh, right...yeah...”

We’d come because Sasa was worried about Kawakita, but the roles had been reversed now, and Sasa was looking awkwardly away. So was I...

Kawakita frowned in puzzlement at our reactions. “No way... Takatsuki, you’re only dating Aya, right?”

Sasa and I let out noises of confusion.

Man, Kawakita looks scary!

“Well, he has two other girlfriends,” Sasa explained. “Oh, Mary might count too, so...three?”

Why would you tell her?!

Kawakita looked utterly disbelieving. “You’re just like them?! I was wrong about you! I thought you were a stand-up guy!”

Really?! We’d never talked though.

“Well, he’s doing his best as the Hero of Roses,” Sasa countered, defending me with a rueful smile.

“And that means he can have lots of girls?”

Yup, that’s the right reaction. Sakurai and the others had gone overboard.

“Actually, weren’t his stats and skills so trash he stayed behind?” Kawakita sneered. “He’s seriously a hero?”

“Well, a lot’s happened,” Sasa said. She then launched into a simple explanation of recent events.

After Sasa finished, Kawakita gave an impressed sigh. “Takatsuki, you went through all that...?”

“See? He’s had it rough.”

Apparently, finding out how I’d gotten covered in burns, used suicide magic, and been petrified had changed how Kawakita viewed me. Sasa had been all too happy to explain.

“I thought Ryouzuke Sakurai was the only one of our class actually trying to fight properly against the demon lords.”

“Well, he’s a diligent guy,” I said. Her disbelief made sense—after all, just showing up in a new world didn’t mean you’d save it. However, our classmates who’d gone with Sakurai had changed as well.

“Well, okay then. Takatsuki, look after Aya. Tell Michio not to work too hard at it. This is all my own fault.” Kawakita smiled, and she didn’t seem to be putting on a front either. She sure was something.

However, Sasa wasn’t happy. I also didn’t want to leave empty-handed.

“Kawakita, there’s a disaster coming for Great Keith soon. It might spill over to this place.” I then explained exactly what Furiae had seen.

“So many people dying in the capital... Really?” Even she couldn’t remain unmoved in the face of that.

“The princess’s predictions have never been wrong.”

“I see... So is this *princess* one of your girlfriends too?”

“What?”

We’ve gotten off track again.

“It’s okay, Keiko. She isn’t yet.”

“I see...so it’s just a matter of time. Good luck, Aya.”

“Yeah,” replied Sasa. “Still, all the girls around him are so cute.”

“Don’t worry! You’re cute too.”

“Uh, guys?!” I interjected. *Can we get off this topic already?!* “A-Anyway. It

could be dangerous to stay here.”

“It’s not like I can run away,” Kawakita said, gesturing to the collar.

“As long as you’ve got that collar on, you physically won’t be able to run, right?” I asked. “And they can find you with it too?” I hadn’t heard about it in detail, but that should be about right. The collar was the thing stopping us from just breaking her out.

“Ugh... We can’t do anything!” exclaimed Sasa. “If we knew what would happen concerning Fuu’s vision, then we might be able to manage *something*... Have you got any ideas?”

“I can ask the princess to take a look again when she’s feeling better,” I suggested. “But other than that...”

I trailed off. There might be a better way.

Noah! Eir! I called mentally. *Do you know what’ll happen in Great Keith?*

No reply. Maybe they were busy?

It’s not like they reply right away every time. I’ll try asking later.

“We’ll look into it later,” I said. “We can’t stay here though, so we need to move.” We’d actually been talking for about an hour.

“Yeah. We’ll be back, Keiko,” Sasa said, regretfully holding onto Kawakita’s hand.

Just as we moved to leave, Kawakita spoke up once more. “Oh, right! I don’t know if it’s related...but the slavers were talking about something weird. There’ve been a lot of people buying up cheap slaves. Well, they might be cheap for slaves, but it’s still a lot of money to toss around—noble buyers who try to hide their names get found out sooner or later...but these people haven’t. Some think the buyers are rich people from another continent, but I saw—” Her voice started shaking. “—there have been cambions mixed in with them. Daemon believers at that. Since I’m a mage, I can read a person’s mana and tell whether they believe in the goddesses or the Daemons.”

“That’s amazing, Keiko!”

“Cambions that follow daemons...” I mused. “So it’s *them* again...”

They'd been in Roses, Highland, Springrogue, and now Great Keith. Something was fishy.

"What you mentioned earlier made me think about it," said Kawakita. "The Snake Sect is always behind the scenes, right? They believe in the daemons, and they also have a lot of cambions in their ranks. Was that helpful?"

"Thanks, Kawakita. It really was," I said.

In the end, I had to tug Sasa along to get her to leave.

It wasn't quite dawn yet. Sasa (in harpy form) was holding onto me as we flew through the air.

"What Keiko said... Well, what did you think of it?" Sasa asked.

"Snake Sect members are buying up a load of slaves. I guess they're going to use them for a rebellion."

"Like they did in Highland?" Sasa asked. They'd used the class divide in Highland to incite a rebellion. Would they use slaves here? "But fighters are expensive, right? Even if they're slaves."

"Plus, it looks like they're treated well here," I added.

The time we'd spent in Gamelan had helped us understand how the country worked. The strong were respected. Even a slave was treated more like a live-in employee if they could fight. Well...that is, with a few more restrictions on their freedom.

A lot of slaves were musclebrains who thought more along the lines of "I can eat until I'm full and just fight," so it was a bit of a win-win situation for them. The nobles also earned money by using their slaves. For example, they could send their forces off to places with lots of monsters or bandits to restore order.

Roses was apparently a big customer on that front. Our soldiers weren't strong enough... Including our hero...

"I don't think the Snake Sect benefits from buying a bunch of weak slaves," Sasa concluded.

"Yeah." Still, it was bothering me, so I'd make sure we told Princess Sophia

and Fujiyan just in case. “Shall we head back?” I asked.

“Hmm, maybe we can stay out a bit longer?” She headed away from the inn, toward the city walls in the opposite direction. We soared above the wilderness for a while before Sasa found somewhere she liked and landed. The sky was starting to lighten.

“Sasa?” I asked as she turned back to human form.

“We’re finishing our date.” She looped her arms around my neck, sending my heart racing. “See, we’re alone. As far as the eye can see.”

“Right, it does kinda feel like we’re the only people in the world here—”

I was cut off by a blaring alarm in my head.

Sense Danger.

Sasa’s eyes sharpened immediately, and we both turned around.

There were about a hundred massive gray lizards with lolling tongues staring at us.

“Wh-What are they?!”

“S-Sand Dragons!”

Their scales allowed them to camouflage with the sand, so they were hard to spot from a distance. Despite the way they hid, they were unusually strong. They were one of many carnivorous dragons that called Great Keith home.

Are we in a nest of them?!

Suddenly, the closest leaped at us with a hiss.

“You keep getting in the way!” Sasa shouted angrily, launching her fist forward.

“Sasa!” That was a dragon! All of them were calamities, so she was in danger...

At least, that’s what I wanted to say.



Her fist impacted the dragon's jaw and it went flying, spinning through the air for over a hundred meters. The way all the others' gazes followed it was kinda cute.

No way?!

That dragon should have been about the same strength as the one we fought in Labyrinthos. The rest of the dragons started hissing and advancing on us, angry that we'd taken out their friend.

"Sasa! We should ge—"

"Get behind me, Takatsuki!"

"R-Right..."

She seemed so dependable. I, on the other hand, was a damsel in distress in the desert since there weren't any water elementals.

Several hours later...they were all taken care of!

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Comes Back from a Night on the Town

“We’re back!” I called.

“Ugh, I wanna take a bath...” griped Sasa.

It was dawn by the time the two of us hauled our ragged selves back to the inn. We were both exhausted, though for different reasons: I’d been frantically using *Dodge* to dodge the sand dragons while Sasa had been tearing through the swarm and tossing them all over the place. By the time she’d finished, there’d been practically an entire mountain made of their corpses. The dragons *were* a danger to the adventurers and merchants that traveled through the wilderness and desert, so it wasn’t a bad thing in that respect...but I did kind of worry about our impact on the ecosystem.

I set those worries aside. I was bone-tired and wanted to get some rest ASAP. Princess Sophia, Lucy, Furiae, and Twi had probably finished their breakfast and were likely enjoying some tea, but Sasa and I just staggered toward our beds.

“Good morning, Hero Makoto, Aya Sasaki,” greeted Princess Sophia, her voice slightly cold.

“You two vanished last night... Where’d you go?” Lucy asked. Her voice was different as well. I didn’t think I’d heard her sound like that before.

“Mornin’. Sophie, Lu...I’m so sleepy...”

Sasa didn’t seem to notice any difference in their demeanors, and I was really tired as well, so I figured we’d talk it out later.

Furiae stroked Twi and said, “The two of you seem like you enjoyed yourselves.” There was a slight sharpness in her voice.

“Hm?”

“Wha?”

Yeah, Sasa and I couldn't just let that one pass. Both of us turned around. Princess Sophia and Lucy both held icy looks in their eyes.

"H-Hey, guys," I said, going for a cheery greeting.

"My, how carefree for someone getting back at *this* time in the morning," Princess Sophia said.

"We were waiting for you alllll night," Lucy added.

Ah, we'd had a miscommunication... Their gazes were getting sharper and sharper.

While I was in the middle of figuring out how I'd reply, Fujiyan and Nina burst in.

"Sir Tackie!"

"Everyone'h! It's awful'h!"

Nice timing!

"What happened?" I asked, wanting to change the subject anyway.

"A ridiculously strong monster has appeared in the plains!" Fujiyan exclaimed.

"Oh? Tell me more," I pressed.

Princess Sophia and Lucy reluctantly looked his way as well.

"Lady Nina, if you would."

"Right'h! There was a rumor in the adventurer's guild this morning'h! All of the sand dragons on the plains were wiped out'h!"

Huh?

Sand dragons?

"What?!" Princess Sophia cried.

"All of them?!"

Lucy and Sophia were both in shock. I glanced toward Furiae, but she didn't seem to care and was scratching Twi's chin now.

A bunch of sand dragons had been wiped out... That was huge news,

apparently. Though, really...sand dragons?

“Unbelievable...” Princess Sophia murmured. “The adventurers and army have been unable to even make a dent in that swarm of calamities...”

“Right’h... They are the rulers of the plains’h. It’s unthinkable that they would be wiped out in a single night’h,” Nina said excitedly.

“Even the elves talked about that nest when I was young...” Lucy murmured.

“I was certainly told to stay away from the plains in Great Keith,” Furiae said.

So these dragons were famous enough that Lucy and Furiae had heard about them. R-Right. What exactly did we do now? I glanced over at Sasa.

She’s sleeping on her feet?!

Yeah...we’d definitely been the cause of this. Should I explain? But...Sasa had actually done it all, and I’d just spent the time running around! Explaining that would be way too embarrassing.

“My esteemed Tackie...” Fujiyan’s *Mind Reading* had apparently done the job for me.

“This cannot be left alone. Clearly, something is afoot,” stated Princess Sophia. “I shall gather information from the castle.”

“I’ll go ask around the guilds’h.”

“I’ll help!” Lucy cheered.

They were all ready to go investigate... N-No, I had to explain!

As I was faltering, Fujiyan stepped in to support me. “Please, wait, if you would. It seems our Sir Tackie here knows about the occurrence.”

“What?” everyone uttered in unison, looking my way.

Sasa was just breathing softly. Damn her... I’d have to explain it all.

“Well, you see...” I then launched into the whole explanation.

“So...Aya wiped them out alone?” Princess Sophia asked.

“N-No way’h...”

Both Sophia and Nina seemed completely taken aback.

“Aya! Aya, wake up! Is Makoto telling the truth?!” Lucy demanded, shaking her back and forth. Sasa just kept dozing, though. She *must* have been tired.

“Even if we tell the truth, will the government believe it?” Fujiyan mused, scratching his head.

It was apparently such a big deal that we couldn’t just say, “Yeah, Sasa took them all out on her own,” and expect to be believed.

“Still, we cannot say *nothing*. The country is in the midst of a huge investigation into what happened. Not revealing the truth will only worry the populace,” Princess Sophia reasoned decisively. She then began preparations to leave.

“Shall I come too?” I asked. I’d been there after all, so maybe having a witness would be useful.

“No. You being there may complicate matters. I will go alone first.”

“I see.” I felt kinda bad. Sneaking a glance at the other witness, I found her mumbling and giggling in her sleep.

“Not there, Takatsuki... Man, you’re such a perv.”

Sasa...you’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?

The room lapsed into silence. Lucy and Princess Sophia were giving me painful looks.

“Aya! Wake up already!” Lucy demanded, squishing and pulling Sasa’s cheeks.

“M-Mmmm?”

Oh, guess she’s awake now.

“Uuuuh...? What’s up?” Sasa asked, squirming in embarrassment as everyone stared.

“You’ve really done it now, haven’t you?” Lucy said accusingly.

“Huh? What do you mean, Lu?” Since Sasa’d been sleeping through the main conversation, she wasn’t following Lucy’s train of thought.

“Congratulations, Lady Sasaki,” Fujiyan added.

“You’re a stone rank adventurer on paper’h...” Nina murmured. “The guild won’t know what to do with you’h.”

Fujiyan and Nina exchanged looks and grumbles.

“Hero Makoto. There is a chance you will be summoned to explain. Remain ready so you can respond,” instructed Princess Sophia. “Aya, you should do likewise.”

“Got it, Sophia.” I nodded.

Sasa just blinked dazedly. She eventually realized that everyone was talking about her, so she cautiously opened her mouth. “Wh-What did I do?”



I bathed and then spent several hours collapsed on my bed, unable to sleep. I just couldn’t rest while the sun was up. Out of curiosity, I peeked into Sasa’s room and saw her sleeping like a log.

My boss had told me to be ready, so I decided to practice water magic in my room. *I only half slept, so I’m still tired...but not enough to actually sleep more...*

So, I sat down and focused—at least partially—on my training. Suddenly, there was a weight on my back.

“Lucy?”

“You usually notice me,” she commented.

When had she come in? She was leaning against me, using my back like the backrest of a chair.

“I just can’t concentrate,” I said.

She gave an uninterested hum and removed her jacket. I heard it slip to the bed. She wasn’t wearing much now, just something like a camisole. I figured she must have been hot, considering how warm the country was.

“I’m melting,” she complained. Before I could say anything, I caught sight of her moving to take the camisole off as well.

“Uh, Lucy? What are you playing at?” Yeah, I had to comment.

“It’s hot, so I’m getting undressed.”

In my room! I cut off the extra perception from *RPG Player* and tried to use my water magic, but I just couldn't do it. Before I knew it, I was just sitting on top of the bed next to an undressed Lucy. What was with this situation?

"You're the type not to feed the fish you catch, aren't you?" she asked.

"Fish?"

"I saw mama and my sisters when I was a kid—I used to think it was immodest for a woman to be making the moves."

"H-Huh..." Well, considering how proactive the women of that family were...

"I was wrong, though! Mama was right. You just never try anything!" She wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

Hot! She's burning up! And I thought she'd been controlling her mana better...

"Guess I'm going to have to make the first move."

"It's kinda sudden, isn't it?" I asked.

She pulled me around and pushed me onto the bed. Then, she started pulling at the buttons on my— *SLAM!*

The door burst open without even a knock.

"I can heeeaaar you." Sasa walked in, rubbing her eyes. We weren't even being that loud. Maybe the evolution had improved her hearing?

"Lucy, leave the playfulness there," Princess Sophia said, stepping in behind Sasa.

"Yup, that's enough, Lu."

"Aw! Come on, just a bit more!" whined Lucy. "Just a bit!"

"No. We're doing *that* together," Sasa replied, pinning Lucy's arms and dragging her out. Lucy didn't really make much of an attempt to resist.

Is she kidding...? I watched the two playfully leave, and then a chill ran down my neck. Princess Sophia was standing right next to me.

"Come. We need to talk." She pulled me along into her room. Her hand was the exact opposite of Lucy's—ice cold.

Ah, she's pissed.

"Hero Makoto," she said once we were in her room.

"Y-Yes?" I asked, straightening. She was my fiancée and had just been to the castle to gather information. Meanwhile, I'd spent the night out with Sasa, had come home early in the morning...and had then been caught playing around in bed with a significantly underdressed Lucy.

Put lightly...I suppose I'd been acting like trash.

"I have information from the castle to report."

Oh. I'd been worrying about the scolding I'd endure, but the princess had jumped straight into the serious topic.

"The upper echelons have accepted that you and your comrade have wiped out the nest of sand dragons... Though they seemed unconvinced."

"Wait a minute—I didn't actually do anything." I'd just spent the whole time dodging. Sasa had done all the work on her own. Why didn't the report reflect that?

"I trust your word, of course," said Sophia. "However, this is a different matter. Do you think I can admit the truth? The reality that our State-Authorized Hero and a single girl fought a swarm of monsters...but the hero himself did nothing?"

"Sorry... I was in the wrong." What kind of useless hero would that be? It had been a good idea to let Princess Sophia control the narrative.

"I also informed them of what you heard regarding the Snake Sect's purchases in the slave markets. General Talisker had presumed you'd never *been* to the market, so it would appear they are watching your movements."

"Then the disguise was the right call." I was glad Sasa and I hadn't just wandered in.

"Regardless, the slave market is a dangerous place at night. Please be more careful."

"R-Right."

I'd probably been a bit hasty. The top brass hadn't noticed this time...but I'd better hold off in the future.

"However, your slave friend is a concern. I tried to discuss that issue as well..."

"What happened?" I asked eagerly, but her tone darkened.

"The noble wishing to buy your friend Keiko Kawakita seems rather taken with her. He has no inclination to let her slip away..."

"I...see."

"The noble in question is the third son of the Bunnahabhain family and spends his time building a squad made entirely of strong women fighters and mages."

"What a scumbag!" Just gathering women stronger than him to make a party... That really annoyed me.

The princess just looked flatly at me. *Huh? Did I say something odd?*

It's pretty similar to your party, isn't it? Noah asked.

Right... The women in my party were all stronger than me...

"Hero Makoto?" Sophia was staring at my face. I hurriedly focused.

"It's nothing. So it'll take a lot of effort to free her."

"It will... The Roses family will continue our negotiations."

"That's a real help."

She didn't reply.

"Sophia?" I asked after a minute.

She suddenly pulled me by the hand to a sofa and then sat next to me. Our shoulders were just on the verge of touching. There was a pleasant scent drifting up from her hair.

"Hero Makoto," she said, calling my name just like she had when we'd first come into the room.

"Y-Yes?"

This time, though, she was less than twenty centimeters from me. Her dark-

blue eyes stared into mine. She was silent for a while, but then her lips parted.

“You were out late with Aya last night, were you not?”

“I was...”

“And you were enjoying yourself with Lucy a while ago.”

I let the silence hang for a while. “Right...”

I’d let my guard down. It wasn’t just work she wanted to talk about. I was really in for it now...

“I really should be closer for this.” Her voice wasn’t angry. She moved in toward me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Sophia?”

“Janet Ballantine was making passes at you in Springrogue.”

“She wasn’t. Who told you that?” Who would have said something like that to Princess Sophia of all people?

“Eir.”

“E-Eir?! *The hell? That mouthy goddess.*”

“She also said ‘Mako—Makoto Takatsuki is weak to assertiveness, so push him down and have your way.’”

“There’s a lot wrong with that,” I mumbled. What the hell was that goddess telling her priestess?

Suddenly, I was flipped onto my back...and the princess hovered over me.

She was right *there*, and I could practically feel the breath from her almost statue-like face. Well, there was a slight flush to her cheeks, so she definitely wasn’t expressionless like a statue. She peered down at me through her eyelashes, almost glaring.

“You’re leaving me all alone,” she murmured, eyes watering. That was so damn cute... I almost felt dizzy.

I...

I didn’t think, just wrapped my arms around her shoulders, then— “Mako! It’s

awful!”

I blinked, and Princess Sophia’s eyes turned from blue to gold. Her tone of voice also changed.

“Uh? S-Sophia?”

The mood was gone.

She looked just the same as usual—other than her eyes—but her mana was different. It was almost prickling at my skin as it overflowed her body.

“Eir?” As a goddess, she was overwhelming...even compared to the demon lord and Grandsage. Also, Eir was the only one who ever called me “Mako.”

“Oh?” Her eyes went wide. Then, she seemed to notice that I was reclining...and the princess was on top of me.

“Am I interrupting something?”

I paused for a second. “A...bit.”

“Damn it!” she exclaimed with a look of chagrin. “Just as she got her courage up too.”

“You shouldn’t be telling her those things.”

“She’s a late bloomer, though. She needs a push.”

Yeah, but telling her to push me down was too much. It was really risky actually. Eir was way too precise with it!

“What’s so important?” I asked, getting us back on topic.

“Right! Well, Great Keith is in danger!”

“Is that the thing Furiae was talking about?”

Looks like he already knows from the moon priestess, doesn’t it? Noah interjected.

“Aww!” whined Eir. “There goes my chance to have him owe me a favor!”

“We’re looking into it,” I said. “Do you know anything?”

The Sacred Deities probably haven’t heard anything, explained Noah. *That’s why they’re asking my elementals for help.*

So that's what the goddesses had been doing earlier when they'd ignored me...

"Did you find out anything?" I asked.

Well, you know how it is... Noah muttered.

Damn. They'd been my last hope.

Eir then hummed and put her hand to her chin. The gesture didn't really suit her.

"The underground is looking fishy," she suddenly said.

"The...underground?" What was I supposed to do with that sudden hint?

Makoto, people in the underground follow Typhon, Noah told me. They must have some hidden shrine or temple where they make their offerings. And, to hide it, they probably keep it underground where people won't stumble upon it.

"I see. So we need to look for an underground temple." That was easy to understand, but... "Gamelan is pretty big..."

It was the largest capital city after Highland's and was also a huge center of trade, so there were lots of people from other continents here. Gamelan was a real melting pot of culture—it was also the exact opposite of Highland's rigid system of dwellings and status.

Gathering information here was going to be tough.

Could we ask Sól about it? proposed Noah.

Right. This was Sól's country, so she'd be the best to ask.

"Hmm..." mused Eir. Her voice (which was still coming out of Sophia's mouth) didn't seem particularly enthused.

"Is it a bad idea?" I asked.

"Well, she's a war goddess," Eir explained, "so she's pretty bad at sneaky information gathering."

Oh, right. She's a musclehead. Noah cursed. It was kinda sad that we couldn't rely on Great Keith's goddess. *Don't bother with Sól. Your friends Fujiyan and Sophia should at least be able to pool their connections to find an underground*

shrine. The real issue is whatever the sect's planning. It must be a pretty huge scheme if they're putting so much effort into throwing us off the trail... Be careful.

"Understood," I replied, nodding in answer to her warning.

Well then, see you! she called out. And with that, Noah was gone.

"I'm heading off too!" said Eir. "You and Sophie enjoy yourseeeelllves..."

At that, Princess Sophia suddenly pitched forward. I quickly caught her soft frame with a yelp.

"Mmh..." Her eyes opened. "Oh... What in the world?"

"You were probably tired," I explained. "You fell asleep."

"That can't... Was it Eir...?"

Ack, caught. I couldn't move from where I was supporting her soft form. Just as I was thinking about what to do, there came a knock at the door.

We quickly separated.

"Who is it?" the princess called out.

"It is me, Lady Sophia. I bring news."

"Enter," she replied once she'd adjusted her clothes and hair. Her voice was the same as always. It was a pretty impressive transformation.

Her guardian knight was the one to enter the room. "My apologies for disturbing the two of you," he said.

"Think nothing of it. What news do you have?"

The knight's serious expression didn't falter as he began to speak. "General Talisker wishes to speak with the State-Authorized Hero of Roses."

Sophia's eyes immediately sharpened. She'd been spot-on when she'd mentioned it earlier.



"This way, Sir Makoto."

The geezer guardian knight led me as we arrived at a huge estate. This place

was close to the castle and a cut above the other high-class houses in the area. There was a huge gate surrounding the estate and massive gardens just past it.

There are water elementals too, I thought. If the worst comes, I should be able to protect myself.

“Welcome.” A man who looked like a butler greeted us as he stepped out of the estate. “Sir is waiting. Allow me to guide you.”

“Farewell then, Sir Hero.”

“Thanks, geezer,” I replied, entering the estate alone. Apparently, the general wanted to talk to me on my own. *That’s the worst...*

Usually when I was around the big shots, I had Fujiyan, Sasa, and Lucy with me. That way, I never needed to speak much. That hadn’t been the case with Princess Noelle, but Sakurai had been there that time. I cranked *Calm Mind* up to the maximum and nervously followed the butler.

The place was decorated with all kinds of statues and paintings. I didn’t know how much they were worth, but they definitely demonstrated the wealth of the mansion’s owner. The butler didn’t lead me inside, but to a place in the garden.

In the garden, there was a small stage—a woman wearing thin clothes was dancing along to some music. Torches were flickering around the stage, making the scene look even odder.

“Please, that way.” The butler pointed. In that direction was the general, wearing much more casual clothing than the last time we’d met. He was sitting on a platform three steps higher than the rest of the area...and he was looking down at me. A lavish array of fruits was spread out before him, and he was being served by two beautiful women—one on each side.

He’s THE Big Shot.

It was almost like a scene out of a painting: Gerhardt Talisker, the father of the Hero of Incandescence, Olga Sól Talisker, and the leader of Great Keith’s army. He was the most influential person in the country after the king. Apparently, he was also pretty close to said king. This was one of the people I couldn’t defy while in Great Keith.

“My thanks for your invitation,” I said, kneeling on the platform like Sophia had told me.

“No, Hero.” Suddenly, the general stood and pulled me up onto the platform. He bade me sit at his side. “You are our guest of honor tonight, Hero Makoto. We have been waiting for you.”

He sounded much friendlier than before. Yet, the smile didn’t reach his eyes, and he was watching me like a hawk.

“Thank you,” I said nervously, sinking down into the seat he offered.

“Bring the hero some victuals,” he ordered. “Let the dancing and music begin!” The music sped up and the dancer began moving almost lasciviously. Several women suddenly appeared at my side—they poured me a drink and brought food to my lips.

H-How am I supposed to be calm here?!

I had to tell them I’d eat by myself—I also took some of the fairly weak fruit wine. For a while, I listened to them talk about the food and dance, and I acted out the correct surprise and praise when needed.

Once the party had been going for a while, the general brought up the sand dragons. “Hero Makoto. You have my thanks for dealing with the sand dragons.”

This was probably the main thing I was here for.

“Well, we were just lucky...” After all, I’d just stood there watching as Sasa took care of them.

“I have to admit, I heard you were a mage...but the sand dragons were all slain by physical attacks, not magic. You seem to be a skilled fighter as well.”

I stayed silent. It wasn’t like I could tell him that Sasa had taken the dragons out barehanded...

“You are usually seen with only a dagger—do you perhaps usually use another weapon?” he asked firmly.

“Well...I can’t really say.”

I couldn't tell him that my stats were too low for anything heavier...so I chose to just not answer anything. He didn't seem to actually need my reply and didn't appear bothered. However, I'm sure he thought I was hiding something.

It'd be so much easier to just say Sasa did it all.

One of the women suddenly spoke up. "How heartening it is to have you here, Hero... You defeated such awful monsters."

"I've always been scared of them, ever since I was a child," another added. She paused for a moment. "Would you...allow me to show my thanks?"

Suddenly, the women were draping themselves over me. They weren't wearing much, so it ended up with their skin against mine. Though I wanted to pull away, I was boxed in.

"Oh, those two seem to have taken a liking to you. If you wish, you could spend the night." The general said this to me casually, like he was just recommending a dessert.

"I'd do anything the hero asked," the first woman said.

"My, so would I. Tell us, Sir Makoto—what are your tastes?"

Can these women just say *anything*? Wait, that's not the point!

You good over there, Makoto? Noah asked in exasperation.

You don't need to tell me, Noah. I know.

Will you get caught in General Talisker's honeypot?

Yes

►No

Even my skill was warning me outright!

"General, while I appreciate the offer, I need to head back tonight," I said, offering a polite refusal.

That'll work, right?

“So the fancy didn’t take you. Those two are some of the most beautiful in the capital, but I suppose if you prefer a different type...how about the dancer over there?”

Even as I was mentally saying, “No way,” I looked at the dancer. She was beaming a charming smile at me. She’d definitely been ordered to try and tempt me as well.

I looked at the first two again. They *were* pretty good-looking.

Still...

I remembered telling Fujiyan and Sakurai that I wasn’t good with attractive women—they’d both looked shocked. I’d then had to explain that I wasn’t gay... I was just *shy*, so I couldn’t deal well with people I didn’t know. Beautiful women just made me more nervous. My old friend Sasa and my adventuring partner Lucy were exceptions. I’d also gotten relatively used to Princess Sophia recently. As for Furiae? If it wasn’t for my skill, I wouldn’t be able to meet her eyes.

This reticence was probably why I was still a virgin.

I had *Calm Mind* set to 99% even now, and I used *RPG Player* to look around.

There were so many beautiful women in attendance—the general had probably arranged for them to be here. But, to me, that beauty just made them tiring to talk with. Also, comparing them just made me remember Noah, who was the self-proclaimed most beautiful woman in heaven.

They just don’t hold a candle to her... I thought. I didn’t say that out loud though.

I heard Noah giggle. *It’s not fair to compare them to me, Makoto.*

Yeah, I know that. There isn’t anyone who can compare to you.

I was sure that the cool look on my face indicated that their plan wasn’t working.

“You’ve barely had anything to drink, Hero. Here, try this thirty-year vintage,” the general said, switching tracks to food and drink. That expensive wine *was* really nice...

Suddenly, as the party hit full swing, a woman arrived. “My apologies for disturbing you. Uncle Talisker, Hero of Roses.”

She was wearing the same kind of thin clothing that was popular for women in Great Keith, but her behavior and accessories were a clear cut above.

“Lady Dahlia. Is your business urgent?”

Ah, I recognize her. The general’s statement made me remember. This was the Priestess of Fire—Dahlia Sól Great Keith. The same woman who had spoken with Princess Sophia the other day.

“Indeed, General. Could I ask for some privacy?” Her face was smiling just the same as always, but her eyes were still flat.

“Move back,” he instructed the serving women. Only the two of us were near the priestess now. The music was still going, so people would be unable to eavesdrop unless they were right next to us.

“So?” the general asked.

“Members of the Snake Sect have infiltrated the city and are plotting something,” Dahlia said.

“I’ve heard the same,” General Talisker murmured. “Capturing some peon will not inform us of their plans, though. The ringleader is likely the only one to know the whole story, and we have yet to find the serpent’s head.”

The party mood around us had vanished, replaced by cast-iron seriousness.

“True...we do not know the identity of the ringleader. However, I *do* know what they are planning,” Dahlia declared. She offered up the first proper smile I’d seen from her.

“They grow more tight-lipped as they rise through the ranks,” General Talisker pointed out. “The rank and file will know nothing but misinformation. Can you trust it?”

“I managed to install a few Temple Knights within the sect several years ago. Several lost their lives when discovered...but they have served us well.”

Oh, going undercover! That was a pretty modern tactic. The priestess seemed to notice my look since she offered a smile.

"It is all for the peace of our land," she said.

"I-Impressive." Roses would do well to learn that pragmatism.

"So, your plan?" the general pressed.

"Three days hence, there will be a gathering in an underground cemetery on the city outskirts. Ordinarily, that place is rarely used, but the sect will be gathering there on that day. And while they are all there...we take them out."

"Very well," agreed the general, his tone hard. "Let us keep this completely secret. I will make sure we have sufficient forces."

"Apologies for the interruption, Hero of Roses," Dahlia said.

"Not at all..." Honestly, should I be hearing national strategy?

Just as I decided to say my farewells, the general turned to me with a grave look.

"Hero, I would like your cooperation three days from now."

"A splendid idea, General!" exclaimed Dahlia.

I started. *So...that's his game.* He wanted to know how I'd defeated the sand dragons...and the priestess wanted to evaluate me as well.

The two of them observed me.

Will you participate in the attack against the Snake Sect?

Yes

No

RPG Player was giving me a selection screen. *Hmm, what should I do?*

It'd probably be a good chance to avert the future Furiae had seen. Though...it didn't really have anything to do with us, and just *me* joining in wouldn't make a difference.

Would it?

Great Keith and Roses were neighbors and had a lot of diplomatic ties. Politically—and considering my position as a State-Authorized Hero—it might be an issue if I turned him down.

While I was worrying about that, a conversation I'd had with Princess Sophia came to mind: *"Hero Makoto, if the general makes any request, you can answer it as you wish."*

"Are you sure?" I asked. After all, I was a political amateur.

"I am. I will trust in your decisions."

"Princess Sophia, he acts without thinking a lot of the time," Lucy warned.

"Yeah, Sophie," Sasa interjected. "Takatsuki's a bit of a weirdo sometimes. Don't trust those decisions too much."

Hey, guys? You could both believe in me a bit more. *Though...I agreed with them.*

The princess smiled. "I have decided to put my faith in him," she declared.

The princess had left it to me, so...

"Very well," I told the general and Dahlia. "I will aid you."

I selected "Yes."

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Searches for the Snake Sect

“It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The Great Keith Martial Tournament has now begun!”

The commentator’s voice echoed, amplified by wind magic, and the Colosseum was filled with the roar of the crowd. The ring below was filled with fighters.

“Wow,” I murmured.

“There’re so many people!” Sasa exclaimed.

We were both slightly taken aback and looked agape at them all.

“Aya, they all look pretty strong,” Lucy said in concern, pulling at Sasa’s sleeve.

“It’ll be fine. You’re such a worrywart.” Sasa seemed unbothered. Lucy was right though—all the warriors in the ring looked really tough and well-built.

This tournament was unclassified—in other words, it was open to anyone regardless of race or gender. Whoever won would be Great Keith’s State-Authorized Hero for the next year. Therefore, they gave a chance to everyone who wanted one. The participants weren’t just locals either. People had come from all kinds of countries seeking fame and honor.

The commentators were now reading out each participant’s name one after another. Sometimes, a name would be accompanied by a cheer from the audience, and I figured that these were the more famous fighters.

“It seems rather odd that there are only thirty-two participants for a tournament of such renown,” Fujiyan commented.

“It’s not quite like that, dear’h. The preliminaries have already been held. There were over ten thousand applicants’h.”

“Ah. I was unaware.”

“Wait, really?” I asked in surprise. “Sasa, did you have to take part?”

“Nope. I just put my name on the entry sheet.”

Hm, what’s this about?

Princess Sophia then spoke up, wearing a hard look. “Hero Makoto, it seems that since she is one of your companions, she was chosen through an exceptions process.”

“So what you’re saying is...”

“That *this* is likely all part of their plan,” Princess Sophia finished. “If Aya had not volunteered, I believe they would have probably found some reason to prompt *your* participation...”

“Defeating Roses’s hero would show how strong their own warriors are.” I sighed. All of my companions’ eyes were on me.

“And representing Roses—Aya Sasaki!” boomed the commentator.

I tried to call out to wish her luck but noticed the sudden change in the atmosphere.

“Go home!”

“You cheat!”

“Boooo!”

“Hurry up and lose already!”

“Think of the people that actually earned their place!”

“Know some shame!”

The arena was filled with booing.

“What?!” Lucy demanded.

“The fact that she did not fight in the preliminary matches leaked. I would wager it was the organizers,” Princess Sophia said, biting her lip.

“The finals are said to be the highest honor for a warrior’h,” Nina—who had once been a warrior here—explained. “An average fighter cannot even get

through the preliminaries'h... It's probably jealousy'h."

That worried me. "Hey...Sasa?" I asked. "Maybe you should withdraw..."

But her gaze was locked on the VIP box where the king and various nobles were seated. It looked like some bigwigs from Highland were present too. Gerald...wasn't there. *That's kind of a relief.*

The exact point of Sasa's focus was Olga Sól Talisker, who was yawning uninterestedly. "Don't worry, Takatsuki," Sasa said, looking back at me with a smile. "I'm aiming for her."

Yeah...Sasa wasn't going to give in.

"Got it. Don't push yourself too hard, though."

"Right!"

I'd just have to support her. After that exchange, I went back over to Princess Sophia and Lucy.

"Sophia, Lucy. Cheer her on, please."

"You can count on me!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Very well. If she is injured, then I will provide healers from Roses," offered Sophia. "The tournament officials have healers as well, but they are supported by Great Keith, so ours will be available just in case."

I appreciated her thoughtfulness.

Sasa turned back to me. "You're going to be fighting the Snake Sect, right? I'm more worried about you."

Indeed, the underground gathering of the Snake Sect was on the same day as the tournament. Was it a coincidence?

No, it's probably on purpose.

It was just like how they'd planned things in Highland. Back then, they'd chosen the day when the Hero of Light was to be installed as a leader of the country. It was the same now—they were moving in the shadows and taking advantage of everyone's focus being elsewhere. Was that archbishop Isaac going to be involved again?

“Well, I’ll see you later!” Sasa cheered before trotting off to the ring.

I glanced at Fujiyan, then Nina, Princess Sophia, Lucy, and...at Furiae, who was unhappily sucking at a straw.

“Cheer her on too, Princess,” I encouraged Furiae. “Are you doing all right, by the way? You could have evacuated back to Roses.”

Since she’d had the vision about Gamelan’s fall, Furiae hadn’t been outside. She’d seemed out of sorts, so I’d suggested she head back to Macallan...but she hadn’t.

“No. I’m not running away alone,” she replied. “Besides, you and the others are staying, so you need to change the future.”

“Got you,” I answered, taking the encouragement for what it was.

“Let us go, Hero Makoto,” the guardian knight called. Princess Sophia had decided that she couldn’t allow me to confront the Snake Sect alone, so the geezer and several other high-ranking knights were helping out.

Good luck, Sasa.

The crowd was still jeering at her as we left the Colosseum and headed for the meeting place.

When we arrived at our rendezvous, a knight from Great Keith greeted us.

“We’ve been waiting,” said one of the men. “You’re the hero’s squad, right?”

“Indeed. And you must be the men General Talisker told us of,” the guardian knight answered.

Neither of them was wearing grand armor, and they both carried the bare minimum of equipment. I was always pretty lightly equipped to begin with. At a glance, our two groups looked like adventurers or mercenaries. This was intentional—we couldn’t afford for the Snake Sect to notice us. That was also why we were in squads roughly ten men strong and why we’d planned to join up at the destination.

The young knight leading Great Keith’s forces guided us. We followed him for a while, and I eventually noticed that the city was getting emptier.

“This is the slums,” our guide explained. “It’s the area with the worst public order in the city.”

I just nodded along. The people milling around here had pretty shabby clothes, and a lot of the kids were barefoot. People had been drinking and gambling before the sun had even risen.

The word “slum” was certainly appropriate.

But...everyone seems oddly bright.

Compared to the same type of area in Highland, there was more life in people’s faces here. There were all kinds of races around—humans, beastmen, dwarves, and even elves. *Maybe there are even cambions?*

We didn’t have any real issues on the way.

A few kids and beggars came up to us, but our guide showed them some symbol and they all raced off with pale faces.

“What’s going on there?” I asked.

“Hero, this mark is the crest of the Herald Knight,” explained our guide. The crest in his hand depicted a goddess holding both a sword and a book.

“Oh, that is most impressive for your age,” remarked the geezer guardian knight.

“Not at all. Our family has been doing the same since my grandfather’s generation,” he replied with an awkward smile.

A Herald Knight in Japan would be a mixture of a police officer and a judge. Apparently, they made on-the-spot judgments of criminals. Knowing that, I thought the kids were right to run away. It also made this young knight a good choice for a guide since he’d know the whole city.

After a while, we stopped walking. “We have arrived at the entrance,” our guide informed us. We’d ended up in some back alley that looked like an abandoned dumping ground. He pointed toward a stone gate that led underground. “This is the entrance to Great Keith’s underground,” the guardian knight explained.

“Because of the heat on the surface, it’s customary in Great Keith to allow our

dead to rest somewhere cooler,” the guide added.

“Huh...”

“Please take care in the dark.”

As we slowly descended, the temperature plummeted. I could almost forget that it was roasting hot aboveground. Periodic vents to the outside kept the place from being completely sealed off, and some light shone through the openings, but even so, this place was pretty much pitch-black.

We used *Night Vision* to progress through the darkness.

There were graves as far as I could see on either side of the passage. It was the middle of the day, and we were in a group, so it wasn't too much of an issue...but I'd happily say no to coming here alone in the dead of night.

Even after we'd been walking for a while, there seemed to be no end to this tomb. “How far do the graves go?” I found myself asking.

“The passage and graves continue outside of the capital. This is an escape route in case the capital ever falls, so it is somewhat of a maze. You shouldn't come here alone.”

Yeeep. Never coming here on my own.

“All of our knights are required to memorize the layout. We are not allowed paper maps... I'm sure you understand why,” he added with a meaningful smile.

“It'd be life and death if an enemy got hold of it.” After all, foes could use this passage to sneak into the capital without notice.

“Indeed. Even notes are harshly rebuked. The punishments are rather unique as well. If a soldier is found with maps of the area, they are left in the middle of it and need to find their own way out. Terrifying, no?”

Was that dark humor? Those of us from Roses exchanged glances.

“A-And if they don't manage it?” That was the biggest question.

The knight wouldn't meet my eyes. “See those graves? They're new knights. At least one per year can't find the way back... Mourning for them is one of the new recruits' roles. I remember well the depression I felt back in the day.”

We all reared back. Great Keith's military was way too hardcore!

The young knight saw our ghastly expressions and shrugged. "Just kidding."

"What?" we chorused.

H-How much of it? Was he joking about the graves...or the punishment?

Let's...just not ask, I decided.

The rest of the trip progressed in silence.

As we progressed further in, the place became more and more dungeon-like. We saw fewer graves, but the passageways still branched off in all directions. There were so many forks and crossroads that I'd have *definitely* gotten lost on my first time here.

Incidentally, I had *Mapping* from my *RPG Player* skill tree, and it was definitely earning its keep. I suppose there was a chance the intel on the Snake Sect was a lie...and that Great Keith's knights intended to get us lost underground. If that was the case...well, I'd really rather not believe it.

"Someone's there," our leader whispered, gesturing for us to stop. We were next to a corner and a long straight path.

My *Night Vision* did indeed spot someone. *Considering our location, it could be some undead...*

"Someone from the Snake Sect," the knight informed us. "A watchman, most likely."

The Herald Knight had pretty good eyes. He looked like he had a touch of beastman in his ancestry, and they had good night vision. Great Keith was mostly a meritocracy, so if someone was strong, it didn't really matter what race they were.

"That...is an issue. This is the only path, and a detour will take too long."

The guardian knight folded his arms. But then, our guide pulled out a magic tool that looked like an hourglass.

"We expected there to be someone posted," our guide said. "The structure of the maze makes eliminating any of them difficult, so we planned for a

coordinated attack once the sand has all fallen. That way, it doesn't matter if we're spotted."

"I see," the guardian knight nodded.

"Do you want me to take that one out?" I offered. So far, I'd been pretty useless.

The Herald Knight looked at me doubtfully. "I don't imagine you can do so without being noticed."

"There are more than a hundred meters between us," the geezer pointed out. "You will definitely be seen."

They were about as against it as I'd thought they'd be.

"Then I just need to make sure he can't see me," I answered calmly.

"They're...asleep."

"It was so easy..."

We snuck up close to them, but they were sleeping deeply. "Them" because there were actually two people on watch duty.

"Hero of Roses, was that the low rank *Mist*?" asked the Herald Knight, looking with interest at the bottle in my hand.

"It was. I made the water in the bottle into a mist and had them breath it in. The trick's a trade secret, though." This particular bottle of water was the one Furiae had cursed with *Slumber*.

"You disabled them without alerting anyone to our presence! And from such a distance! Incredible."

The guardian knight was just impressed. "An interesting technique. I'll keep that in mind." His gaze was sharp, though that sharpness vanished almost immediately as he addressed our group. "Thanks to Sir Makoto, we can progress. Restrain the Snake Sect members. One of us will remain here—the rest will advance. We are close to our goal."

We nodded quietly and proceeded through the darkness in silence. Our

guide's face was tense. We were probably very close.

Eventually, we saw the glow of a red light up ahead. *Clairvoyance* indicated that the light came from flames.

"They're there," I said.

"Indeed. The Snake Sect is definitely meeting here."

We decided to wait a decent distance away. Suddenly, the Herald Knight's eyes widened in shock.

"I-Impossible!" he yelled, quickly dashing off.

What? Weren't we waiting?

"What are we doing, Hero?" asked another knight.

"We'll follow him," I said. None of us had any idea what was going on, but I figured that's all we could really do.

The long corridor exited into a weirdly open hall. Torches ringed the room, casting the interior in red. I didn't understand what I was looking at for a moment, but I thought that *something* was covering the floor.

It was a pile. Hundreds of people stacked up. Humans, beastmen, adults, children...all slumped together.

A-Are they dead?

It looked like a mountain of corpses. My body froze at the bizarre sight.

"Damn it! Why?!"

"What in the world! Stay with me!"

The two knights had rushed over to the closest victims. I followed quickly behind and then softly touched someone's face.

Their skin was still warm, and their chest rose and fell, albeit only slightly. I could still hear them breathing. *Ph-Phew, they aren't dead.* None of them responded to the contact though.

"Healwater."

Oh, nice one, geezer! I didn't know you could heal. He might look pretty harsh,

but he was adaptable.

Apparently, all of the water knights could. They gradually cast the magic on the various people piled on the floor. Unfortunately, I had no healing skills.

“There’s no sign of the Snake Sect here! Just former slaves! They’re all almost dead as well. Call the healers!”

The Herald Knight was calling for reinforcements into some kind of magic tool. I couldn’t use healing magic *or* call for help, so there was nothing I could do. Instead, I just carefully watched over the collapsed people.

Huh?

Something was weird. The mana surrounding them was ridiculously weak. Their bodies were weakening too. It was almost like something...was draining their vitality. In a way, I recognized the situation.

“Geezer, do you have a Soul Book?” I asked. “A blank one, for reference.”

“I do not... What do you need one for?”

“Hero!” exclaimed the Herald Knight. “Do you know what happened?”

“It looks like they used sacrif—suicide magic... Or, well, were *made* to use it.”

That was my guess based on my own experiences. I could remember the feeling of my mental and physical strength fading away. And when I’d used it, I’d also fallen unconscious.

“Exchanging their lives for powerful magic... That’s forbidden!” the guardian knight cried out.

The Herald Knight turned to me. “The churches of the goddess strictly prohibit suicide magic. They shouldn’t even know how... Why are *you* aware of it?”

Oops, yeah... It was kind of weird for me to know about it. I worried for a couple of seconds before answering, “The Grandsage told me about it.”

He wouldn’t be able to fact-check. After all, she was massively influential in Highland.

“The White Grandsage... Yes, she is the preeminent mage on the continent and has a thousand years of knowledge... I can certainly see that.”

“I wanted to check their lifespan to verify,” I said. “Is there any way to do that?” A Soul Book could definitely show us.

“That is no concern,” said the Herald Knight. “I have a spell to investigate such things.”

“Huh, I didn’t know there *was* a spell for that,” I admitted.

“It displays a person’s stats and skills, so it shouldn’t be used freely... This is an emergency, though. I will apologize later.”

He then touched one of the children’s foreheads and mumbled a spell. A faint light formed around them, which looked the same as when someone used a Soul Book.

The Herald Knight’s expression twisted. “What in the world?” he whispered.

“What happened?”

“He has...*days* left.”

“Days?!” the guardian knight demanded angrily. “What cruelty!”

“What’ll happen to them?” I asked. Was there anything we could do?

“Worry not. We will take them to our priestess and beseech Sól. It should be possible to extend their lives to a degree... Though it will require a significant payment.”

“Payment?” I asked in confusion.

“An offering,” the guardian knight explained.

Oh, right! You could buy longevity in this world.

“Won’t it be a pretty big sum, though?”

“It will... But there is no other method. I will make the request to His Majesty.”

With how dog-eat-dog Great Keith was, I was pretty worried about them paying to extend slaves’ lives. The Herald Knight at least wasn’t going to abandon them. That was good.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps.

“What happened here?!”

“Where is the Snake Sect?!”

“Sól gave us the information!”

Knights swarmed the area, healers among them.

“Show me the weakest!”

“Anyone empty-handed, take them outside! We don’t have the room to heal them here!”

“There are foreigners here—can we show them the way out?!”

“This is an emergency! General Talisker has allowed it.”

There was a flurry of activity as the healers prioritized the most injured and the Herald Knight issued orders. The group from Roses helped ferry the wounded out. With my strength, I could only carry the children.

I hate my stats...

Complaining wouldn’t do any good, so I set to working. There were more and more reinforcements and by now, we’d gotten about half of the slaves out.

Eventually, the guardian knight called out to me. “Hero. We shall remain here. Why not go support Lady Aya?”

“I’ll stay until they’re all out,” I declared.

Sasa wouldn’t be happy about me prioritizing her over wounded people. I made the trip to the surface several times, and after a few hours, everyone was out. The people in the worst condition were taken to the church first. At this point, there seemed to be nothing more for us to do, and that was when the Herald Knight approached us.

“Hero Makoto, knights of Roses. Thank you for your assistance. Fortunately, no one seems to have died.”

“That is all we can ask,” said the geezer with a smile.

“I wonder what they were planning,” I mused.

They’d spent huge amounts of money to buy up slaves and then used almost

all of their strength with suicide magic. But...for what? The man's face hardened.

"We are currently organizing a search party to locate the Snake Sect. We have captured and interrogated all known members but have yet to find any pertinent information."

"Perhaps we set their plans back?" suggested the geezer.

"I certainly hope so, but..."

I listened to their conversation with half an ear, but I also reflected on my day under the influence of *Calm Mind*.

Then, a voice in my head spoke up.

Makoto, they were used for sacrificial magic. Though, I don't know what that magic was used for... Eir and Sól probably don't either.

None of you know?

The people behind this are protected by Typhon's blessings. The daemon's influence hides the future, so we can't tell what's happening. Be careful.

I will. Thank you, Noah.

"Maybe if we knew what the magic had been used for," I interjected.

The other two looked at me.

"Did it not fail?" asked the guardian knight. "Nothing happened in the end. Is *Suicide Magic* not the practice of sacrificing your lifespan to cast magic?"

"No, it's just using your lifespan to make up for a mana deficit," I clarified. "If their lifespans were used, it was probably to cast something."

"Hero Makoto." The Herald Knight offered a deep bow. "I know nothing of *Suicide Magic*. If you noticed anything, anything at all, please tell me."

The guy was really earnest and forthright. I wanted to help him, so I thought carefully and then started speaking.

"Like I just said, it's fundamentally making up for a deficit... This is only a guess, but let's assume the Snake Sect used it for something." If Noah was right, then that was undoubtedly the case. The other two nodded along. "The sect

doesn't attack without backup. In Roses, they conjured blight giants. In Highland, they used a swarm of wyverns and a stampede. Even in Macallan, they summoned another stampede and an ancient dragon. Springrogue was Zagan's army and resurrecting a demon lord... So, they must be trying to dilute Great Keith's strength somehow."

"By buying slaves?" the Herald Knight asked.

"They let those slaves go, though, Hero."

"You're right. But the slaves aren't fighters—just fuel for magic. Past history shows us that the sect uses monsters frequently."

"So...they're going to cause a stampede here?!" the guardian knight shouted. The Great Keith knights all looked our way in shock.

Quickly, the Herald Knight pulled out his communicator. "Alert the city watch! Check for nearby monsters immediately!"

He'd acted fast. It was good to see.

"Thank you, Hero," he said. "We have put our forces into making sure the Snake Sect members do not escape, but the possibility of external attack is still there. I have informed them to be on guard for such a thing."

"We can simply watch for monsters!"

"W-Well..."

All the knights from Roses wore satisfied expressions. It felt like they were all a bit optimistic. In some ways, this was a good thing, but it made me uneasy when I considered them fighting against Iblis.

"Thank you for everything. I will continue our search. Why not go back to the tournament? One of your comrades is participating, correct? If she advanced, I believe they are currently holding the semifinals."

With that parting suggestion, the Herald Knight took his leave. He'd been pretty agreeable the whole time.

"Let us return to Lady Sophia."

"Let's."

We hurried back. It had been morning when we'd left, and a lot of the day was already gone. Was Sasa still in the fight? As we jogged, I asked the guardian knight about the tournament.

"Have you ever competed?"

"Once... Unfortunately, I never made it through the preliminaries."

"O-Oh."

Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

"It is rare for our fighters to make it. I believe Lady Aya should offer us a good showing though!"

"Yeah, she should still be in the game," I replied with a nod.

The tournament only lasted for a single day because of how impatient the citizens were. I'd have thought splitting it up over a few days would make for a better show. Any injuries sustained were healed right away by the best healers the country had to offer, so that part wasn't an issue. The geezer and I were discussing that when the Colosseum came into sight. Once we'd shown ID, we headed in. It was just as loud—maybe even louder—as it had been this morning.

The crowd was pretty into it.

We're so late... I wonder how Sasa's doing?

I was looking for the seats where Lucy and Furiae were when I heard the amplified commentator's voice.

"Our winner! Aya Sasakiiiiii!"

Huh...? Wait...what?

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Watches the Tournament

“Our winner! Aya Sasaki!!!! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new hero!!!”

I hadn’t heard wrong. The commentator *just* shouted about her winning.

Already? From what I’d heard, the finals usually took place in the evening.

“Ayaaa!”

“So strong! She’s unstoppable!”

“She’s tiny but mighty!”

“She’s so cute! I wanna take her home!”

“Hahhh, hahhh, Aya-ya!”

People seemed way happier with her than they’d been this morning. Well, *obsessed* might be the better word. Apparently, Great Keith really did love their strong people. Some of those comments though...

“Makoto! You’re back?!” Lucy exclaimed, running over.

“Yeah... It’s over?”

“Yup! Aya took them all out in one punch! It was amazing!”

Whew... A single punch for every match?

“My knight, why are all otherworlders so absurd?” Furiae asked. She was holding a parasol and fanning herself with a hand.

Ah, there’s Twi hiding in the shadow of her skirt.

“Nrow, nrow.”

I stroked the cat’s chin. *You came out in the heat to support her too, huh?*

“Sasa’s just special,” I replied. “I’m still impressed she won.”

Sasa was standing in the middle of the ring waving at the spectators.

“It wasn’t even a contest. And it was wonderful to hear the booing just fade away!” Furiae’s face was a mix of exasperation and enjoyment. Yeah, she had a bit of a bone to pick with this country.

“Did Sasa get hurt?” I doubted it if she’d won in a single hit each.

“The healing I arranged is going to waste,” Princess Sophia remarked with a rueful grin.

I thanked her anyway. “It made it much easier to relax knowing they’d be here though.”

“Takatsuki!”

“Whoa, Sasa.”

She’d come over from the ring and was now hugging me.

“I won!”

“Congrats! Sorry I missed your matches.”

“Don’t worry about it. The real one’s next,” she said, looking up at the VIP seats.

A dark-haired hero was looking back—Olga Sól Talisker, the Hero of Incandescence.

“There will be a short intermission followed by an exhibition match between Aya Sasaki and Lady Olga!” shouted the commentator.

A moment later, a figure appeared in the ring.

“Lady Olga?” the commentator repeated. This time, it was a question.

The hero had been in the stands until a moment ago. *Did she jump down from there?* The VIP area was more than ten meters in the air.

Olga said nothing, just folded her arms and looked down at us almost challengingly.

“See you later, Takatsuki.”

“Aren’t you going to take the brea—”

Before I could finish, Sasa leaped down into the ring.

She glared at the hero from about a meter away.

“Oh, what is this?” the commentator said. “The match isn’t scheduled to begin for a while!”

The crowd began to stir.

“You just fought. Go get healed,” I heard Olga say with *Listen* as she jerked her chin toward the healers.

“I don’t need it. I was just warming up,” Sasa replied evenly.

“Oh...so *this* is the real match? I suppose we’re continuing from the other day.”

“That’s right. I’ll beat you here.”

The two of them smiled fiercely at each other. The air was shimmering with their aura. The tension between them made the crowd fall silent.

“A-Ah...the match will be a little later...” the referee said hesitantly.

“Well, looks like she wants to get started.”

“I’m ready when she is.”

The two of them told the referee that they were ready.

At that, the official gave some kind of signal to the commentator.

“Oh! It seems like the pair are going to start right away!”

The crowd roared.

“Allow me to introduce our fighters! This is an exhibition match against Great Keith’s strongest fighter, the Hero of Incandescence, Olga Sól Taliskerrrrr!”

The hero remained calm even as the crowd cheered wildly. She was a symbol of strength for the country, and the combination of both strength and beauty made her immensely popular.

“Up against her we have our overwhelming warrior from Roses, Aya Sasakiiii! It’s been decades since a foreign warrior has become a hero for our country! She should put up a good fight!”

Sasa smiled and waved at the crowd.

The cheer was just as loud as the one for Olga. If people were supporting her over Olga, then she'd gotten the crowd well and truly on her side. I used *Listen* to pick up on some of the crowd's comments.

"Who's gonna win?"

"Don't be an idiot! Lady Olga will never lose."

"But Aya's pretty strong. It should be a good fight."

"Yeah, she's the strongest we've seen!"

Great Keith's people definitely saw Olga as the strongest, and no one thought she'd lose.

While the cheering was going on, Olga and Sasa retreated to either side of the ring. Neither of them got into a stance or anything—they just stood there. Some of the spectators were already yelling for them to start.

"The Great Keith Martial Tournament exhibition match is about to start!" the commentator announced.

"Begin!" the referee said sharply.

Instantly, Sasa leaped, her fist closing in on Olga. The hero evaded it, countering with a kick.

Sasa caught the kick on her arm.

There was a heavy thud and Olga's leg crunched into the floor.

Come on... That arena's made of stone...

The two struck at each other time and again, but both of them kept blocking or dodging... At least, that's what it looked like to me. Honestly, I could barely follow what was going on.

"Did you see that defense?"

"Yeah, amazing! She got two feints in there."

"Was that a triple punch?"

"Moron, it was four. Two with each hand."

The spectators were a bit too insightful. Hell, they were all just analyzing it!

“Can you follow it, Lucy?”

“Yeah. They’re still feeling each other out. I think Aya’s only at eighty percent speed.”

“O-Oh...”

They weren’t taking it seriously yet?! Really? Lucy had good eyes and was apparently doing just fine, but I wouldn’t even be able to see anything when they really got into it. The exchange carried on for a bit before the two separated.

“Not bad. You’re stronger than before,” Olga said with an impressed smile.

“Right! I trained,” Sasa returned with an innocent grin.

“Let’s end this, then.”

As she said those words, Olga’s aura practically exploded around her.

The skill to turn heat into aura... It was a skill she’d been blessed with by Sól, and it had made her strong over the years. The skill was terrifyingly effective in Great Keith—the air here was always scorching from the pounding sunlight, but that helped her.

A moment later, Olga vanished.

I heard the thud of something hitting something else, and a dark figure flew toward the edge of the ring.

Sasa?!

I hurriedly looked that way...but it was Olga who’d gone flying. She stood back up immediately but with a look of surprise on her face.

“Yes!” Lucy cheered, pumping her fist.

What happened? I hadn’t seen anything.

“L-Lucy...what was that?” I asked quietly.

“Hero Olga finally got serious but Aya used the skill she’s been saving. She tripled her speed with *Dash* and then used a *Charged Attack* to knock her away! That was great!” she explained happily.

Oh, right. That made sense... Wait, what?!

“Sasa won without using her *Action Game Player* skill?!”

“Yup. She didn’t want to show the hero.”

What the hell? She hadn’t measured up at all even *with* her skills before, but since her evolution, she’d been fighting without them...

“Tch!”

Olga’s aura exploded again. Sasa met her with a smile. They crashed into each other once more. This time, Sasa went flying, but she didn’t seem hurt and stood up again.

Sasa started the next exchange, and they collided for a third time.

Several minutes later, the two of them were still on par with each other. They couldn’t seem more different, though. Sasa was breathing heavily but visibly enjoying herself. Olga’s expression was twisted in annoyance.

There was a clear division among the spectators. This wasn’t the decisive victory for Olga that they’d expected, and at this rate, it could end in a draw.

The general public was nonetheless excited—this country was just *really* fond of strong people.

The problem was in the VIP seats. The royals and nobles all had sour looks on their faces. The harshest expression was on the face of the hero’s father—General Talisker.

Conversely, nobles from other countries like Highland were all smiles as they talked with the nobles from Great Keith. We were too far away to hear (even with *Listen*), but it was probably banter about another country’s fighter matching their hero. Highland had a lot of people with...*pleasant* personalities.

Actually, how was *our* princess doing? I turned to look and was met by a pair of sparkling eyes.

“H-Hero Makoto, Aya is this strong?!” Princess Sophia exclaimed, tugging at my sleeve. Her voice was brimming with excitement.

“She’s been working hard to level up.” Sasa was over level eighty now, having

kept up with the leveling even after evolving into a lamia queen.

“And thus is born the strongest fighter in Roses...” the guardian knight added before panicking and turning to me. “Ah, I’m not taking you lightly.”

“Nah, she’s definitely the strongest,” I replied with a deprecating smile.

“What a fight!” the commentator said. “This has been well worth the wait! We all knew how strong Lady Olga was...but who could have predicted Aya Sasaki’s strength?! As much as I hate to say it, the time allowed for the match is near—”

The commentator was about to announce that the match was over, but he was interrupted by Olga. Her angry yell echoed across the stands.

“Wait! Come! Balamung!”

A magic circle formed around her. It was similar to the Crimson Witch’s teleport spell, but inverted.

A...summoning?

Summoning magic was usually for calling tamed monsters. However, this time, a sword appeared.

The sword shone bright red as it formed in her grasp.

“A-Ah... Lady Olga? Should you not be forgoing the holy sword during the tournament...?” the commentator asked hesitantly.

Balamung—the holy sword of Great Keith. It was an heirloom weapon passed down through generations of Sól’s chosen heroes.

“Aya Sasaki! I challenge you to a duel in the name of the Hero of Incandescence, Olga!” she proclaimed, readying the shining sword.

“Lady Olga?! There were no plans...” The sudden demand had come from Olga herself, and the commentator was blatantly bewildered at the event going completely off script.

“What?”

“A duel?”

“I wonder if Lady Olga’s fighting seriously...”

“No way.”

The audience was stirring as well.

“Halt! Olga!” General Talisker yelled from the VIP seats.

Is he acting...or not?

The general couldn't have been pleased by a fighter from a weak country like Roses proving equal to Great Keith's greatest fighter. Judging from his expression and harried tone, he certainly didn't seem like he was putting on an act.

The hero ignored her father's rebuke and directed another yell toward Sasa. “Aya Sasaki! Will you accept?! Or not?!”

“You cannot!” Princess Sophia exclaimed. “Aya, Hero Makoto! Dueling against a hero with a holy sword is folly!”

“Sasa!” I yelled, trying to tell her not to accept.

“Got it, Takatsuki!” she replied with a thumbs up.

What a smile she has...

Hm?

I had a bad feeling about this.

“No, Sasa! That's not what I mean!” I hurriedly yelled.

But she didn't hear me—she spoke over me, at the same time.

“I accept, Olga!”

Argh, she went and did it now...

“Hero Makoto! Why did you not stop her?!”

“I tried!” I managed as Princess Sophia shook me by the shoulders.

There was a reason for her panic. Heroes blessed by the goddesses were the only people who could wield the holy swords passed down in each country.

Ascalon, the holy sword of Roses, was wielded by Leonardo Eir Roses.

Clarent of Springrogue was wielded by Maximillian.

Caliburn from Highland was wielded by Gerald Ballantine.

Likewise, Great Keith's Balamung was wielded by Olga Sól Talisker.

A hero blessed by the goddesses could—through releasing their blade—multiply their power several times over. It was said that only heroes who had done so could defeat the demon lords. Thus, they were considered to be each country's strongest fighter and the symbol of a nation's strength.

Although apparently, not even Gerald and Olga—the Heroes of Lightning and Incandescence—together could hold a candle to the Hero of Light and his borrowed magic sword.

Well, he is supposed to be the reincarnation of the savior, so him being OP is to be expected...the bastard.

Olga readied her blade while squaring off against Sasa in the ring. "Aya Sasaki, prepare your weapon!" Apparently, she wouldn't attack an unarmed opponent.

"I'm fine barehanded," Sasa replied, punching a palm.

"Oooohhhh! Aya Sasaki is ready to take on Lady Olga barehanded! This is crazy! Does this count as suicide?!"

Oh...the commentator was back. And on the offensive.

"No way! Surrender now!" shouted someone in the crowd.

"Aya's gonna die!"

"Ruuun!"

"Lady Olga, stay calm!"

The spectators were just as worried about Sasa. She just smiled and waved—it was obvious that she had no intention to withdraw any time soon.

This is bad...

"Hey." Lucy turned to me with a concerned look and tapped me on the shoulder. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Well, it's not exactly a *good* situation. Sasa was the one who agreed though."

"H-How can you be so carefree?! Are neither of you worried about her?!"

Princess Sophia demanded. “I am putting a stop to this.”

She moved toward the arena, but Furiae stopped her in her tracks.

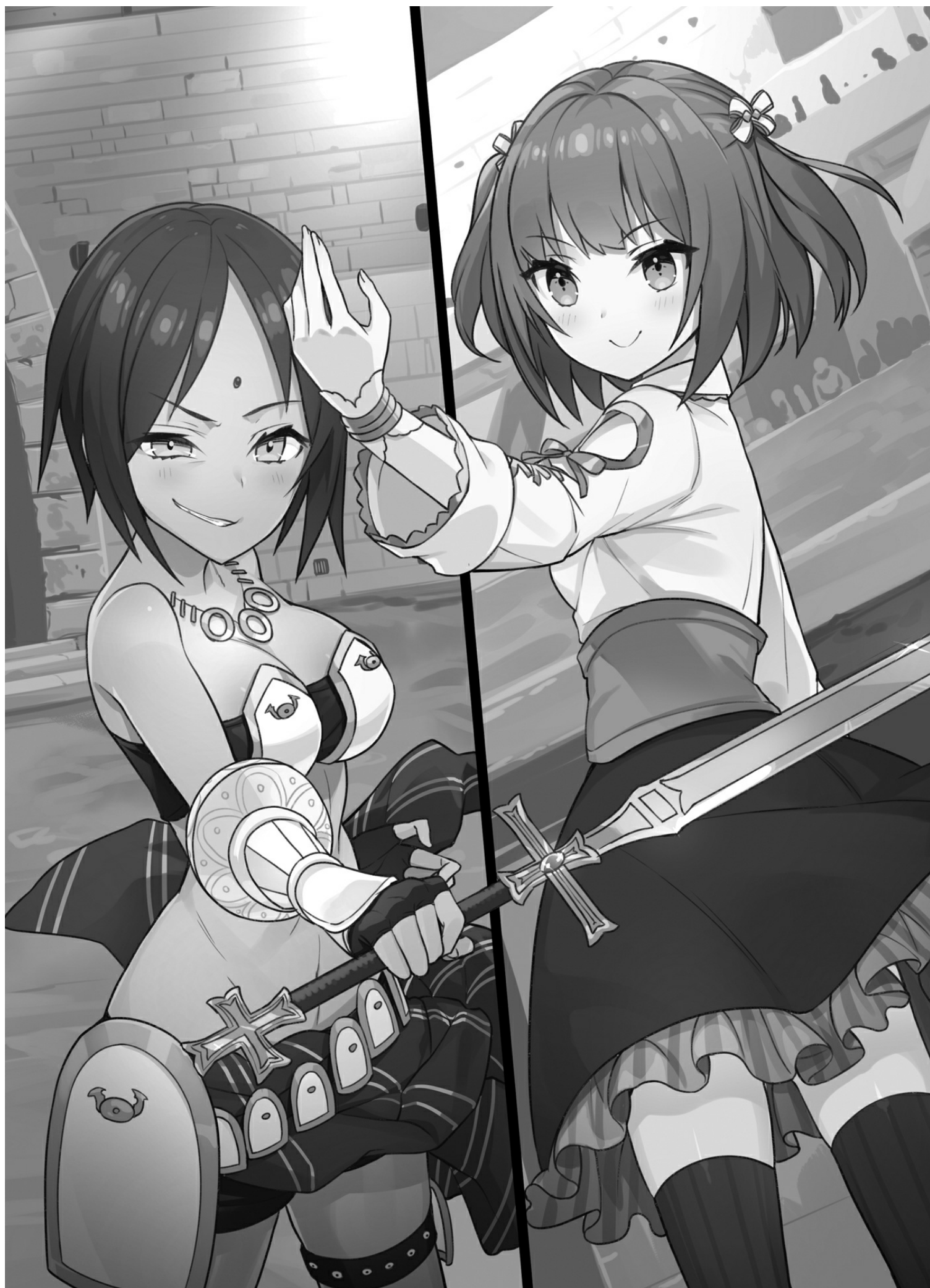
“It’s already begun. You’ll just get pulled in.”

Furiae gradually pulled her back. It was a real relief—there was no way *I’d* manage to physically stop Princess Sophia.

In the ring, the light around Olga’s sword billowed like flames. The mana within the blade—said to be a blessing from Sól—seemed more like a bomb on the verge of exploding. The air was starting to waver with the heat.

“You want to fight without a weapon? You’ll die,” Olga warned once more.

“Don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s get started,” Sasa replied, beckoning. The hero’s expression grew even harsher.



“You’ll regret that...otherworlder,” she muttered.

Maybe she had a bit of a bias against otherworlders? I mean, we did sort of just show up out of nowhere and throw the world’s power balance out of whack.

“H-Hero Makoto! Aya is—”

Princess Sophia was yelling even as Furiae held her back.

“Sasa’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“What?” Princess Sophia looked at us doubtfully. “How can you be so calm?”

“Well, Sophia—” I started. But then, Lucy cut me off, pointing at the ring.

“They’re starting!”

“Referee! Once you give the signal, move away!” advised the commentator.

“Otherwise, you will be caught up in it.”

There was a pause.

“Are you sure about this?” the referee asked Sasa.

“Yup, it’s fine,” she replied, cool as a cucumber.

“Then, on my mark... Begin!”

The referee gave the starting signal and simultaneously leaped from the ring. Olga and Sasa were the only people in the arena now. The spectators were holding their breath, and not even the commentator had anything to say.

A beat. Then, Olga vanished. A second later, the ring exploded.

I couldn’t see her attack, or Sasa taking the attack, so everything that happened was explained to me later by Lucy.

Olga had sprung up into the air and then fired all of her sword’s mana down at the ground. The attack was like a meteor strike, and Sasa had taken it head-on. The arena was splintered like a bomb had gone off—a blast of wind buffeted us as a massive cross of red light formed in the air.

After that, I could see what was going on again...somewhat. *That’s...like Sakurai’s sword technique and Rosalie’s saint rank magic...* Apparently, attacks

of that caliber formed crosses like that.

The ring was now covered in dust, so we couldn't see anything.

"Aya?!" screamed Princess Sophia.

All around us, spectators were trembling at just how powerful Olga's attack had been.

"Wh-What in the world?" the commentator said eventually. "Is Aya Sasaki safe?"

That was pretty much what everyone wanted to know. The dust cleared gradually, revealing a pulverized ring. No one said a word. I could've sworn I didn't even hear anyone in the audience breathe.

"Uh...what? L-Lady...Olga?"

The commentator's voice was shaking.

The first thing we could see was Olga, slumped against the inner wall of the Colosseum. Maybe she'd been slammed into it? Her armor was cracked and broken...

Like something massive had crashed into it.

She's not dead, right? Olga looked like she'd been in a car crash.

"Ugh," she groaned.

Well, she was still conscious at least. She soon staggered to her feet. I was glad she was still alive. Her face was flooded with disbelief. She glanced between her broken armor and the ring. There was nothing in her hands—Balamung was nowhere to be seen.

"A-Aya Sasaki is fine! She's standing in the ring!" echoed the commentator's voice.

In the middle of the dust cloud, where Olga's attack had been at its strongest, Sasa was standing like nothing had happened.

She was shining with light that shimmered in the hues of the rainbow.

"Aww, she let everyone see her skill," Lucy whined.

“Well, at least she’s safe,” I said, sighing in relief. I’d been pretty sure she would be, but the scale of Olga’s attack had still made me worry.

“What in the world was that?!” Princess Sophia demanded, grabbing hold of me. She’d been too busy with all the official business, so we hadn’t gotten time to explain Sasa’s new power yet.

“It’s a skill she got from *Action Game Player* when she evolved,” I explained.

“A new skill...those seven colors of light? Oh, it’s fading now.”

Indeed, the kaleidoscope around Sasa was fading away.

“Takatsuki! I won!” Sasa cheered, posing with her fingers up in a “V” shape.

However, my eyes were more focused on the bent and battered sword at her feet. *This is bad, right? I mean...Balamung is a national treasure...and we broke it...* I’d heard that it was priceless—practically beyond value. This wasn’t going to cause an international incident, was it?

“C-Congrats, Sasa,” I said. She’d won, so she was entitled to some celebration.

“Yup! Go ahead and praise me more!” She nodded, then jumped at me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Ah...Aya? What does your skill do?” Princess Sophia asked dazedly.

Sasa giggled. “It’s *Super Star*!”

“What did you say?”

I remembered how lost for words I’d been upon seeing the skill for the first time. *Super Star*. It was as terrifying as it was simple. While the skill was active, she was invincible. It protected the player from all attacks and nullified all defenses against the player’s attacks.

Princess Sophia froze as she heard the ridiculousness. Lucy and Furiae’s expressions of disbelief and exasperation were the only real responses.

Sasa giggled shyly. It was cute, so I found myself stroking her head...even as I complained mentally about her skills being bugged to hell and back.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Defies Destruction

“L-Lady Olga...can you continue?” the commentator asked hesitantly.

She simply shook her head with unfocused eyes.

Well, Balamung’s attack that she was so proud of did nothing, and she just got sent flying... She’d need to be pretty mentally hardy to continue, but it seemed like she couldn’t. In addition, her sword was bent miserably on the floor... Would it be fixed before we fought the demon lords?

“V-Very well! The winner of this exhib—or rather, this duel—is Aya Saaaasaaakiii!”

The stands roared, cheering her on. I’d honestly been worried that there might be a riot because of Olga’s loss, but the crowd was all too happy to celebrate.

Strength really was everything to them. In some ways, it was easy to understand.

“Well done!” Lucy cheered.

“I won, Lu!” Sasa replied as they high-fived.

Princess Sophia was still gobsmacked. Furiae was just fussing over Twi. *Wasn’t she worried at all?* She seemed to notice my look because she peered back with half-lidded eyes.

“I saw a vision of this happening,” Furiae stated.

“Ah, right.” Well, that made sense. *We should probably get going though.* As I turned to say so, Furiae suddenly grabbed my shoulder.

“Wait, my knight. Something is strange.”

“Strange? What?” I asked, looking around.

Olga had ground the arena to powder, so the staff was cleaning it up. The medal and induction ceremonies were usually carried out on the ring, but with

the current lack of usable space, they'd announced that it would happen in the castle at a later date. The spectators were all chatting as they headed home. Some of them were on their way to a party. Nothing about the scene seemed strange, and everything felt peaceful.

"What's up, Fuu?" Sasa asked.

"Come on, Princess Sophia," Lucy said. "Let's go home."

"Seriously, Princess, what's—"

Furiae cut me off. "Damn, I was wrong! We need to run!" The rest of us exchanged glances before looking back at her.

It was probably about two in the afternoon. The air was still hot and the sun beat down upon us blindingly. No clouds marred the sky—it was blue as far as the eye could see. I was about to ask her what was wrong again when suddenly, the area darkened.

"Oh, clouds?" Lucy asked, looking up. I did the same.

Above us was a black figure. The sun had been blocked by something massive.

"What's that?!"

"Not a cloud."

"A rock?"

"Don't be an idiot! There aren't rocks that big."

Everyone here had noticed it at roughly the same time.

Something had just appeared in the sky.

"Makoto! It's falling this way!" Lucy shouted, bringing me back to earth.

"What is it?!" I asked.

"I don't know! It just appeared out of nowhere!"

Yeah, it definitely hadn't been there a second ago. Somehow, this massive stone...rock...thing had appeared above us.

It's still pretty far away... And it's pretty damn big...

If I had to guess, I'd say it was probably a few kilometers in diameter.

Truthfully, it was more like an island falling from the sky than just a rock.

Makoto! Furiae's right, run!

Noah? What's happening?

Mako! You need to run before we explain! The daemon followers...

Eir's usual easygoing nature was nowhere to be found in her voice. Moving away was obviously the best plan now. I met the geezer guardian knight's eyes, and we started moving with Princess Sophia in between us.

Then...

"Know fear, vermin," echoed an amplified voice through the Colosseum. It wasn't the commentator from earlier. This voice was more cloying.

"Look!" Sasa pointed.

Where the commentator had been, there was now a man wearing a black robe. He held an amplifier in his hand. Everyone around him, including the original commentator, had fled.

The knights need to get him!

"Who are you?!" shouted one of the knights as they surrounded the man. I looked closer and saw that the yell had come from the Herald Knight who'd guided us that morning.

The black-robed man's lips twisted in a grin. "I am called Isaac. I am our great leader Iblis's son, the archbishop of the Snake Sect!"

Oh, that was a familiar name.

"Him again? He doesn't know when to quit," Lucy complained.

"That's the guy who controlled the suicide bombers in Highland, right?" Sasa asked.

"Yeah. He apparently did a lot in Springrogue too..." This guy was a hard worker... Though we could do without hardworking terrorists.

"Seize him!"

There go the knights...

“R-Release me!” Isaac yelled, overcome by their numbers.

What is he even trying to do?

“It is too late! The comet above your heads is the fruit of our summoning spell that took the lives of hundreds of slaves! We changed the route of a passing comet—it is now aiming for Great Keith! In only a few hours, Gamelan will be wiped from the face of the planet!”

He continued yelling even as they bound him in thick ropes.

That’s some claim. His plan was to drop a comet on the capital? Was that even possible?

As proof that I’d not misheard him, the spectators—who had been mostly relaxed—all started to yell and stampede. Yells of anger and fear filled the air, along with the wails of children. It was chaos.

“Get the citizens out of the city!” General Talisker commanded with a yell. “Summon all mages from the castle! I don’t care if they’re on-duty!”

Behind him, I could see some royal-looking people evacuating.

“Hero! What are we doing?!” the guardian knight asked, giving me a panicked look.

“You need to take Princess Sophia...and my friends... Get out of the city.”

“Very well! And...what of you?” His affirmation was firm, but his subsequent question was filled with worry.

“There’s something bothering me,” I answered. “I need to go talk to the general. I’ll catch up.”

“What are you saying?!” Furiae snapped. “My knight, we *all* need to run!”

Princess Sophia also protested my plan. “Hero Makoto?! This is not the time...”

“I’ll be fine. See you later.”

We didn’t have time for a Q&A, so—I pushed them toward the guardian knight so they could evacuate. Great Keith’s knights would probably prioritize guiding a foreign princess and her retinue, so they should be fine.

Now Fujiyan's the only one I have to worry about...

The chaos in the Colosseum was still showing no sign of abating. If anything, it was spreading to the rest of the city. The massive hunk of rock above us was slowly hurtling closer. Fujiyan should have noticed that something was off. I'll bet he immediately set about gathering information and acting. I'd just have to believe he'd make it out.

Once I saw the geezer moving away, I started heading to where the general had gone.

"What's bothering you, Takatsuki?"

"You're really not going to run?"

Sasa and Lucy were peering at me from either side.

Wait.

"Why haven't *you two* run?!" I'd hoped that the two of them would have gone with the knights.

"Well, you stayed behind."

"If you're here, then we will be too."

"Guys..." I groaned. The two of them certainly had nerves of steel.

"Plus, if it comes down to the wire, I'll pick you both up and run away!" Sasa cheered. "You can count on me!"

"Yeah...that probably *is* a good idea." Considering her strength, we'd be out of the city in seconds. We'd tried something similar once before, and she'd been ridiculously fast. It'd also been terrifying though, like a roller coaster without any of the safety features.

Lucy chuckled. "You think too narrowly, Aya! After all, my mother's hellish training has allowed me to use *Teleport*!"

"What, really?!" I asked.

"Wow!"

That was a nice miscalculation to make. With *Teleport*, we could be out of here instantly. But then, I hummed mentally. I'd known Lucy for a long time

now. If she'd really mastered it, she would be wearing a much more smug look on her face. She would be boasting too.

"So, just making sure... How long does the *Teleport* chant take?" I asked.

There was a long pause.

"About ten minutes?" she answered.

Yeah, figures. "And what's your success rate?"

There was another *long* pause.

"A-About...one-in-ten."

"Lu..."

Sasa and Lucy both looked depressed.

"Well, that's about what I thought it would be," I said, resigned. "Get started on the chant now, but we'll go with having Sasa carry us out as Plan A."

Sasa pumped her fist. "You can count on me!"

Lucy indeed started chanting, but she had a surly look on her face. By comparison, her mother could just pop on over to neighboring countries without a chant at all—she was a monster like that. Lucy'd probably manage the same thing...eventually. Then again, Rosalie was over two hundred, so that might be far in the future.

Suddenly, a shout of "Fire!" broke through my thoughts. I looked up and saw several beams of light converging on the rock. It seemed that the mages of Great Keith were firing attacks at the comet.

"They're not hitting, are they?" Sasa asked.

"Doesn't look like their spells can reach it," Lucy replied.

"The two of you have such good eyes..." They could see the actual trajectory of the spells. I was using *Clairvoyance*, but everything was still too far away for me to make out.

Why were the girls in our party so strong?

Suddenly, the Herald Knight approached us. "Oh, Lady Aya, Sir Makoto of

Roses?”

“This is pretty bad,” I said.

“It is. To think that *this* was their plan. A swarm of monsters, even tens of thousands strong... We could have withstood them. There are no prior examples of such a spell though...”

“The comet was a new idea for them too. Do we have any defenses?” Even though I’d asked, I figured the long-range magical bombardment we’d seen was probably the best defense we had...and it wasn’t doing much.

“No, unfortunately. We have tried much, but nothing has been effective... So please, evacuate.”

“Can I talk to General Talisker?” I asked.

“To the general? But...”

Was it my status? I was the Hero of Roses, but maybe that wasn’t enough to enable me to meet with the man in charge during an emergency. I really wanted to warn him first...

“Very well, Sir Hero. This way.” The Herald Knight had been conflicted, but he eventually chose to lead the way.

We walked to an area of the Colosseum that had been turned into something like a command post. There was a group taking command of the evacuation. Another suggested strategies against the falling comet. Yet another was informing the citizens who hadn’t yet realized what was going on. There was even a group treating people who’d been injured in the chaos.

In the middle of all of them was General Talisker. He was listening to each squad’s reports with a severe look on his face. I could see Olga next to him, her head bowed. Was she okay?

The Herald Knight approached him and whispered into his ear. He looked taken aback for a moment when he looked our way, but he didn’t ignore our presence—he soon came over to us.

“My apologies that the birth of a new hero has been marred with such an event...” he said. “However, I do not have time to chat now. We will do what we

can, so you should all evacuate. Lady Aya Sasaki, you have only attained the right to *become* a hero of Great Keith—there is no need for you to remain here.”

The nearby knights were already getting ready to guide us out. They were shuttling foreigners out quickly, and that was the way things normally would have gone down.

Suddenly, some words drifted into my field of view.

Will you save Great Keith in its hour of need, putting them in your debt?

► **Yes**

No

Uh, that's a bit harsh. You've been kinda rude recently, RPG Player. Well...it likely represents my feelings.

Wait, did that mean *I* was rude? No, no way...probably.

Reaaaally? Noah interrupted.

I...was getting off track. Quickly, I turned to face the man in charge.

“General, can I try something against that thing in the sky?” I asked, pointing at the comet.

He paused for a moment. “You have a method of diverting it?”

As he listened to my plan, the general’s eyes grew sharper.

◇ General Talisker’s Perspective ◇

The Snake Sect was dropping a comet on the capital. It was the greatest threat to the city in its history.

We underestimated them.

Gamelan had been ready for whatever enemies came our way, no matter how many monsters they threw at us. But, we had never dreamed of an attack like this.

The royalty and nobility were all evacuating via teleportation. I figured they should soon arrive at a safe location. There were tens of thousands of other people that called Gamelan home, though. Those with extra mobility or people who could use magic would probably leave the city shortly, but what of those who could only travel on foot?

I felt my teeth grind at the thought of how many deaths we would be facing.

“There must be some option. Gather all mages at high rank or above! We’ll try blasting it from the sky!”

My tone was harsh, even though I hadn’t intended it to be.

“We are! The king, ultra, and high-rank mages are all engaged with it now!”

“To what end?”

“We cannot tell.”

As should be expected. I could see no differences either.

“What of our weapons?” I asked. “We have siege arms and such to wipe out monsters.”

“The comet is still out of range... We are making them ready to fire, but it needs to get closer first.”

There would be no point to that. Even if we broke it apart just above the town, the debris itself would wipe us out. While I was racking my brain, a subordinate came up to me.

“General. The Hero of Roses is here. He wishes to speak to you.”

“What?”

I looked behind him to see the slender youth looking curiously at my men working.

The Hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki. Out of all the otherworlders that had arrived with the Hero of Light, he had the lowest value. This information had been reported to us, and I had checked his abilities. His stats were pitiful, and his skills were average. He was not someone who could stand against the resurrected Iblis. He had been left behind. No country had thought they needed

him, and so none had taken him.

Then, a little over a year later, his name had come up as the State-Authorized Hero of Roses. Very few people had been interested in him at that point. After all, we'd considered him to be a weak hero, nothing special.

Then, he had beaten the Hero of Lightning, Gerald of Highland, in a duel. He had dealt with the monsters attacking their capital. He had defeated the ancient dragon attacking Roses, and finally, defeated a demon lord in Springrogue.

The Hero of Roses from a thousand years ago had been no real help against Iblis. There were rumors that Eir was favoring Makoto Takatsuki to purge that stain on her name.

His fame was now on a similar level to the reincarnation of the Hero of Light, Sir Sakurai.

Unamused by this, my foolish daughter and her childhood friend had colluded to mess with him. Olga, Sól's hero, had made a show of her power. Dahlia, Sól's priestess, had used the church to spread rumors about him. I had told them to stop, but they hadn't listened. Olga had eventually been crushed by his companion. Relations with Roses were going to be fraught. This wasn't the time for those considerations though.

I approached the Hero of Roses and met his gaze, bidding him talk.

"General, can I try something against that thing in the sky?" he asked casually. He looked abnormally calm among the stressed men and women trying to deal with the crisis.

It was just like someone with *Calm Mind*, but was that all? How could he be so relaxed?

"You have a method?" I asked eventually.

"You could call it a trade secret," he replied meaningfully. "There is a spell I want to try."

So he had some plan, but wouldn't share the plan itself. Well, a hero's techniques were state secrets, not something to blab to all and sundry.

Suddenly, the Snake Sect member—who'd named himself Archbishop Isaac—yelled out, "Ha! You fool! It cannot be stopped!" Questioning him had revealed nothing. In fact, the person physically in our custody wasn't even Isaac—it was just a zealot, a mere puppet whose body was controlled by the archbishop. While he had been silent until now, Makoto Takatsuki's arrival had loosened his tongue.

"That comet is not some construct of magic!" Isaac continued. "We warped the path of a comet with a century-long orbit using summoning magic! It used the lives of hundreds of slaves! And it'll need hundreds more over several hours to set it back! The comet will fall before then! You will never manage it! This is the end! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

The man laughed crazedly. It was hardly so amusing.

"Silence him," I ordered. My men bound his mouth with rope.

"Cheers. He's a noisy one," the hero commented with a tired look on his face.

"Why'd he explain, Lu? Was he bored?"

"Just warped in the head. I mean, he hides behind puppets. I bet his face is disgusting!"

The women of his party were rather harsh toward the man.

"You seem like you might have a chance... Perhaps Lady Aya's power? The skill she brought to bear against my daughter?" I guessed.

The strength she had displayed was horrifying. It had put Olga silently into second place with a single hit.

"Unfortunately she is exhausted from the earlier battle—" the hero replied languidly.

"What?! I'm fine!"

"Hey!" he yelled, hurriedly covering her mouth.

"Mph!"

She certainly didn't *look* exhausted. There was probably a reason he didn't want her fighting. Perhaps some cost to her skill.

“Sasa! Just rest!”

“Come over here, Aya.” The redheaded elf pulled her to the side. I was hardly going to force *her* to do anything either.

“So, you have another method?” I asked the hero.

“An idea at least.” He looked confident and relaxed. At this point, I had no other choice but to let him try.

“I shall leave it to you,” I said before calling the Herald Knight over again. “Take him where he needs to go.”

The Herald Knight should be able to offer some assistance to the hero...in addition to gathering information. After all, he *had* been a State-Authorized Hero himself.

“I shall guide you to the mages,” said the knight. “This way.”

The hero, the redheaded mage, and the victorious warrior all followed. The hero’s two companions seemed uneasy, but he just looked like he was off for a stroll.

The reports were right... The Hero of Roses often put himself in dangerous situations. All the reports from my subordinates supported that.

“The Hero of Roses is a reckless man.”

“According to the adventurers, he took on an ancient dragon with a dagger.”

“He personally fought the demon lord in Springrogue. He cannot be sane.”

Those were the various opinions of my men after their investigations.

Makoto Takatsuki lacked a sense of danger. Ordinarily, a hero’s strength meant that they would be heavily protected against a demon lord. And yet, the Hero of Roses threw himself into the flames of battle.

Just like the legendary Abel the Savior.

The ancient hero Abel had gone to the demon continent with four people. According to legend, he had wanted to prevent any losses, so he’d tried to face Iblis alone. The first Grandsage, Anna the Holy Mother, and Johnnie the Spellbow had convinced him to let them join.

Nowadays, a few fighting against a demon lord was unthinkable. Even Olga had several hundred people in a squad—high-rank warriors and mages—when fighting. That was our strongest team, and the one we were sending for the Northern Front Plan.

I looked once again at the hero and his two companions walking away. The massive rock in the sky was casting a vast shadow over the city. Thus far, we had no way to break the deadlock.

I am counting on you, Hero who saved Roses and Springrogue.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"We are here," the Herald Knight said eventually.

He'd guided us to the highest level of the Colosseum. Here, there were mages lined up. Some shot magic at the falling comet and some used magic tools and such.

"That place will work," I said, moving toward the least-populated area. I didn't want to catch anyone in this.

"What are you planning?" Lucy readied her staff, nervously glancing up at the sky.

Right, I needed to explain things to my friends.

"Lucy, what is the thing above our heads?" I asked, pointing.

"What? I mean, just look at it! It's a massive meteorite!"

"No, it's not. It's not a meteorite—it's a comet."

There was a moment of silent confusion. "What's the difference?" she asked.

We didn't have time to waste, so I just got right to it.

"Essentially—"

"Oh, I know!" Sasa interrupted. "It's made out of ice and dust! So you can do something with your water magic!"

"Truly?! You can deal with that?!" The Herald Knight leaned in close, his words urgent.

“W-Well, I won’t know unless I try.”

My water magic proficiency was over 250 at this point, an amount that baffled even the Grandsage.

“I-Incredible!”

The Herald Knight was really impressed...especially considering I hadn’t started yet.

No time like the present.

I rolled up my sleeve and tried to use water magic on the comet, only to be interrupted again. This time, it was Noah.

It’s not happening, Makoto.

Why?

It’s covered in ice, but it’s rock at its core. That comet is hundreds of meters in diameter. Your water magic isn’t enough against it.

Oh, right... They had rock cores, didn’t they? I wasn’t exactly up to date on astronomy.

That isn’t all, Mako.

Oh, Eir. It’s been a while.

She giggled. *It has. But listen: that comet was summoned from space, so it’s from outside of your world. It’ll be harder to affect than normal ice. Controlling a comet of that size will require ridiculous amounts of mana.* Her voice held a touch of sorrow.

Well, nothing went according to plan.

“Takatsuki?”

“Makoto?”

“Hero...is something the matter?”

All three of them were looking worriedly at me because I’d just stopped suddenly.

“It’s fine, don’t worry.” I’d honestly expected things to be at least this

difficult. *Noah, it's time for my plan*, I thought. *I'm finally using it.*

You're serious, aren't you...

Mako, please. Rethink this.

Those responses from the goddesses weren't exactly encouraging, but was there another way?

Silence. Guess they had no other ideas.

Right, then let's get going.

"M-Makoto...the comet's getting close. I'm ready with *Teleport*," Lucy informed me.

Sasa piped up too. "Takatsuki...if it comes to it, I'm grabbing you both and running."

Both of them seemed really worried.

"Well, just watch."

I rolled my right sleeve all the way up. Then, I used *Transform* on my right arm. It...was hard to control. The area around my arm felt like it was blurring. At the same time, my arm started to glow blue.

"Makoto..." Lucy murmured. "What are you doing?"

"That's *Transform*, right?" asked Sasa.

"Yup," I confirmed. "A partial one, just on my arm."

I set *Calm Mind* to 100% and focused.

If I lost concentration for a second, I'd pass out. I could hear something snapping around my ears. I knew it was the mana coming off of me, and I shuddered.

Right Hand of the Elemental.

This was a spell I'd named myself—not something you'd find in any spellbooks. It transformed my arm into that of an elemental. However, elementals were part of nature. The small elementals I usually saw had no individuality. One was all. Water elementals essentially made up the water in

this world, and that's why they had unlimited mana. Noah had taught me that before.

Gradually, my arm morphed into blue light. It wasn't flesh and blood, but *something* connected to all the water in the world, a fragment of infinite mana.

Now that I thought about it, I'd used river water to defeat the first monster I'd encountered in this world, a goblin.

In Labyrinthos, I'd used the water elementals to fight the blight dragons.

In Roses, I'd used Princess Sophia's mana to defeat the blight giant.

In Highland, it had been Undyne.

In Macallan, I'd used *Synchro* with Lucy and used the fire elementals.

I'd borrowed power from everyone and managed so far.

But...I wanted to win on my own merits. The Grandsage had given me the hint. Becoming stronger...meant giving up on my humanity.

"Right, I can't stay a human and get stronger!" I quickly realized I'd spoken aloud. "I just need to become an elemental!" I said to Sasa and Lucy, a firm look on my face.

More silence, from Sasa, Lucy, and the Herald Knight. Noah and Eir too.

Why? It was kinda awkward. Well, whatever.

Here goes nothing.

I raised my right hand and focused on the mana. My hand blurred, not stabilizing. I felt like I was sinking into mud, and my arm was aching.

What?

My vision was wavering. Was I...mana-drunk?

A flash of lightning and a peal of thunder shook the air. I looked up, and the previously open sky was covered in thick clouds. They were growing darker and darker.

"Makoto...did you do this?"

"Takatsuki, you changed the weather..."

I heard Lucy and Sasa, but all of my focus was on controlling the mana in my arm, so I couldn't respond.

Something fell on my cheek. Water? Suddenly, it was like a bucket had been overturned. Rain fell torrentially.

Sasa and Lucy yelped.

"Hero! Look!"

I followed his gaze. There were hundreds of water dragons swimming through the sky. It was like they were climbing the waterfall of rain.

Water dragons... Was that me?

My magic was running wild. I couldn't stop it.

Calm Mind. I stopped thinking and just focused.

It...wasn't working though. *Weird...*

Suddenly, I thought back to the conversation I'd had a few days ago with Noah and Eir.

◇ Several Days Ago in a Dream ◇

"I want to use *Transform* to change into an elemental. Can I?"

I stared at Noah and Eir, waiting for a response to my idea. There was a *loooong* pause. Then, in flat unison and with mouths agape, they asked, "What?"

"Do you *have* a brain in there?!" Noah demanded, whacking me around the head.

"You really are an idiot, aren't you? Are you *trying* to kill yourself?"

It wasn't like Eir to get that harsh.

I scratched my head. "Hm. I guess not...?"

The Crimson Witch had used that *Elemental Unity* thing, but my stats meant I couldn't do the same. So I'd figured, *Why not just become an elemental wholesale?*

I'd really thought it was a good idea.

“Definitely not. You sound just like those guys who go after power at all costs, you know? Besides, you’d need around level 300 mast...” Eir trailed off midsentence as she received a look from Noah. “What?”

“Unfortunately, he’ll be hitting that pretty soon,” Noah explained to Eir.

“No way. Seriously?!” Her mouth was open again.

“So that means...?” I could do it, right?

“I said *no*!” shouted Eir. “There are heaps of people who’ve tried it for power and failed. You’ll die, Mako! Then Sophie will cry! No! Not happening!”

Eir’s position against it didn’t falter in the slightest. Noah looked conflicted as she stood with her arms crossed.

I stared at my goddess’s face.

“Makoto, if you ever try it, have *Calm Mind* completely active,” she said quietly, arms still folded.

“Noah?!” Eir demanded reproachfully.

“You mean...have it at 100%?” At the Water Temple, I’d learned that mental stabilization skills like *Calm Mind* and *Serenity* could, at max, be 99%. Was 100% even possible?

“Humans are incomplete existences—they rage, weep, and cheer, unable to control their emotions. That’s why a 99% maximum for that kind of skill is right. It’s part of the ideals of the Sacred Deities’ religions. Publicly, at least,” Noah murmured.

“You...shouldn’t say that,” Eir complained with a sour look.

“Is it possible?” I asked her.

“It’s...*possible*,” Eir answered unhappily before turning to my goddess. “Are you sure about this, Noah? You know people can lose their emotions if they overuse those skills.”

“They can. But if he tries to *Transform* into an elemental without being able to control those emotions, it’ll be a disaster.”

“Well, you’re right about that...”

The two of them exchanged worried looks.

“Got it. I’ll focus on *Calm Mind* first then,” I assured them.

“I’d really prefer you didn’t try at all,” Eir griped.

“Give it up, Eir,” said Noah. “He won’t listen.”

“He’s your believer, isn’t he? You always get the crazies.”

“Shut it. All yours are weaklings.”

“That’s fine. I’m a pacifist. It’s not a problem.” Eir pouted as the two began arguing over their believers.

Either way, that was praise...right?

“It was not,” they retorted in unison.

How sad.

“Makoto. Don’t do it unless there’s no choice. You’ll probably fail.”

“Or just don’t attempt it at all...”

That was the warning I’d received from the goddesses.



My arm wouldn’t stop aching. The weather was getting worse and worse. Rain pelted against me, and many water dragons were rampaging through the sky.

I can’t...control it at all...

I’d managed to reign in my *Water Magic* until now, but this time...it wouldn’t listen. Noah and Eir were right. Was it beyond me? *Fine*. I at least needed to make sure I didn’t cause issues for everyone else.

Listen to me, damn it! I yelled mentally.

But I noticed too late—*Calm Mind* had slipped from 100%. Before I knew it, I was swallowed by darkness.

Uh...

What...?

I looked left and right.

Nothing. I couldn't see anything at all. My surroundings were completely black.

I peered up. *There!* A small light. It was wavering like the surface of a pool, sparkling with light.

Can't...move... Drowning...

I couldn't even shift a finger. The light above me was gradually getting smaller, farther away.

I was falling.

If things kept going like this, I'd be in trouble... I had to do something, but...

I couldn't muster any urgency. It didn't matter. I sank deeper and deeper, unable to move.

Was this...it...?

"Damn it! What are you playing at, Makoto?"

Someone had grabbed hold of my right hand.

What?

I couldn't even speak, but I was suddenly on the surface, yanked back to the light. My vision went white, and then I was back in the Colosseum, right at the top.

It was weird though. I couldn't hear anything—not the mages firing spells at the comet, and not the people screaming as their running feet pounded against the floor.

I then noticed that the countless drops of rain were suspended in midair. Everything was just as I remembered it, but static...like time had stopped.

"You messed up big time," said a familiar voice from my side.

I glanced over. Flowing silver hair and deep-blue eyes—skin that practically shone. The woman at my side was literally an otherworldly beauty.

I shouldn't have been able to see her outside of my dreams...

“N-Noah?” I stuttered. She was supposed to be in the Seafloor Temple.

Hurry up! exclaimed Eir’s panicked voice in my head. *I can only keep this up for so long!*

“I know, I know.” Noah chuckled. “How long has it been since I’ve stood up here like this?”

The air seemed to shake in response to her voice.

“Um...how *are* you here?” I asked, unable to follow.

“I asked Eir for help, but I can only be here for a hundredth of a second. I’m warping the space around us to slow down time. We don’t have long.”

“R-Right...?” That was a big claim. She was controlling time?

“Come on, Makoto. You should do something about *that*, shouldn’t you?” she pointed.

“U-Urk...”

The comet was close... This huge mass, bigger than a castle, was right on top of us, nearly ready to drop on our heads. Give it a few dozen seconds and this whole area would be a pancake.

“Can’t you?” I asked.

“I can’t. Gods can’t directly interfere with people’s fate. It’s divine law.”

I felt like I’d heard that before...

“We don’t have time, so I’ll keep the lecture short.”

She touched my arm softly. The spot she touched felt almost boiling with heat. An odd shudder ran through my entire body.

“Ready, Makoto?” her gorgeous voice caressed my ears. “If you’re going to do this, you need to give up on controlling it. Just imagine what you want. Gently request it. Like, hmm...”

She put a hand to her chin, then seemed to think of something.

“Clear.”

Instantly, the thick cloud above us vanished, and the sun shone again. In less

than a second, the weather had done a complete one-eighty. The air and the ground and everything else seemed to shiver in happiness. It was like she'd charmed the world itself...

"So?" Noah asked.

"I-I don't know what to say." I fell silent as I looked at her smile.

I hadn't understood anything... She hadn't needed an incantation or a magic circle. Nothing. Her will had just...happened. Just as she'd wished.

It was a miracle of the gods...

Noah! I can't hold it! shouted Eir.

"That's it?" she whined. "Fine. Good luck, Makoto."

"R-Right," I replied.

Noah immediately vanished in a flash of light. The flow of time began once more—previously suspended drops of pounding rain collided against me, along with harsh sunlight from a now clear sky.

"Makoto!"

"Takatsuki!"

Lucy and Sasa's voices shook. We didn't have long until the comet's impact.

"It's okay now," I told them. Then, I peered back up at the comet.

I hadn't understood Noah's magic. Humans probably couldn't. Shouldn't, even. But I had now experienced it. Up close and personal.

I pushed my shining blue arm forward and spoke in the elemental language.

"xxxxxxx (Water elementals...)"

Elementals were nature itself. Turning into one meant no longer being human.

I'd offer my arm up.

The comet was like a wall in front of me, and I could hear screaming all around. I manipulated *RPG Player*, changing my viewpoint to be as far overhead as possible. From this vantage, I could see the whole capital. My body looked

like a miniature model.

The comet was falling toward the city. I stared at it detachedly from the *heavens*.

Let's do this.

"xxxxxxxxxxxx (I need your help, elementals.)" I called to them softly, like when I'd first used elemental magic.

"xxxxxxx (Oh? You again?)"

Out of nowhere, a gorgeous woman with blue skin appeared next to me.

Undyne! I hadn't seen her since Highland.

"xxxxxxx (Do you need something?)"

"I want to do something about that," I replied, pointing to the comet. "Are you able to manage it?"

"I am," she replied carelessly before murmuring something. A spell...

Water Magic (Saint Rank): Frostbane.

Suddenly, the capital was enveloped in a massive barrier spell. The comet—a small mountain's worth of ice—was immediately blocked. People who'd been crawling around below like ants just stopped—both in their own tracks and in their screaming.

The comet hurtling through the air impacted the barrier, then slowly slipped down the side, falling next to the capital. The moment it hit, the ground shook. However, that was the only damage done. A comet so large that it would've wiped out the country had landed...and caused no harm at all.

Great Keith was saved.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Is Thanked

◇ Olga Sól Talisker's Perspective ◇

"What... What in the world?"

I couldn't understand what I was seeing. Gamelan had been surrounded by a barrier.

Cheers rose up around me.

"We're saved!"

"What happened?!"

"The Hero of Roses did it!"

"Is he the savior?!"

The military had been on the verge of despair, but the mood had instantly pivoted into excitement. This comet was so large that it should have been on the level of *divinity* in terms of destruction. That's what the mages had said.

But it had been blocked.

Like it was nothing.

By the Hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki.

The same State-Authorized Hero of Roses I'd called "nothing much" just days ago.

He must not have been fighting seriously...

That was the only thing I could come up with. There was just no way he'd learned how to do something so ridiculous and powerful in just ten or so days. Makoto Takatsuki was controlling more mana than I had, even when I released my holy sword and went all out...and he was doing it with a serene look on his face.

I shuddered. The mass of ice rolled slowly to the side and fell gently outside of the town. I just couldn't understand it. How could he move something so

massive with magic? Just how much mana did a spell like that even need?

Was he really human? The question made its way through my mind as the ground shook from the comet's impact.

Suddenly, he collapsed.

"Makoto!"

"Takatsuki!"

"Hero!"

His comrades and one of my father's men rushed toward him.

"Hurry! Get someone who can heal!"

"We cannot let him die!"

The locals were all panicking as they carried him away on a stretcher.

I could only watch it happen.

For the next few days, I shut myself away in my room.

The tournament and the ensuing chaos were all the city could talk about. One of the topics was the new State-Authorized Hero of Great Keith, Aya Sasaki. She had blitzed her way through the entire tournament and brushed the goddess's hero—me—aside as well. She was...incredibly strong. And now, she'd been appointed Great Keith's State-Authorized Hero.

Even when I'd attacked at full strength, she'd been completely unharmed. She'd bent my sword with a single hand. She'd sent me flying.

She was the country's new darling...and I couldn't even muster up the motivation to challenge her again. The citizens loved her. A strong new fighter was a boon to the country.

Incidentally, Makoto Takatsuki's role in saving the city was not particularly well-known. The accepted story was that our armed forces and mages had managed to defend against the massive meteorite. As a matter of record, it made sense—a single person shouldn't have been able to do anything against that utterly absurd attack. A whole organization's worth of power should've

been needed to stop it. The evacuating citizens hadn't seen him act either.

The military was another matter, though. They had evacuated the citizens and done what they could in the short time they'd had. Then, they'd despaired. There had been no defense against that massive rock.

Makoto Takatsuki had done it alone.

Every single soldier who'd been in the capital now adored him. There was also a *line* of mages hoping to talk with him, and I could understand why they'd want to find out about the spell he'd used.

However, he had lost consciousness...and hadn't yet woken up.

Apparently, he wasn't likely to die. I would need to apologize when he awoke.

My father—the general—was checking on him daily. Father had wanted to bring the vanquisher of the demon lord in Springrogue into our ranks to begin with. Now, he was utterly devoted. Even *he* had been charmed by Makoto Takatsuki's spell.

What a terrifying man.

Abel the Savior had once gone to fight the Great Demon Lord's army—hundreds of thousands of foes—with only four people. I'd always thought of that story as an exaggeration. Despite that, there were people in our army calling the Hero of Roses another savior.

It was, of course, due to the impossibility of his accomplishments. People revered miracles.

Yet, there was something about it all that still bothered me...

That light...that figure...

Just before the comet fell, I and the other soldiers had been gathering our mana to deflect the impact. I'd suddenly felt a huge surge of mana. When I'd leaped to the top of the Colosseum, I had seen a holy figure standing at Hero Makoto's side.

It Was Not Meant To Be Seen.

My brain had rejected the vision before my eyes saw. Looking at *it* would've

surely sapped my sanity. Fortunately, it had only been there for an instant. Not even a second. Gone between one blink and the next.

The figure's lips had twisted into a grin as it vanished.

I'd prickled with goosebumps. My body had stiffened and I hadn't been able to make a sound.

I had seen something not meant to be seen. And now, that was all I could think about. I wanted to forget...but I couldn't.

Seeing the Hero of Roses stand impassively next to that existence made him all the more terrifying.

What...was it...?

I didn't know. I was just scared. Even remembering it gave me the shakes.

Suddenly, my door clicked open.

"At least knock," I protested.

It was my childhood friend, Dahlia. She was Great Keith's priestess, and I was her guardian knight.

"His Majesty really raked me over the coals for messing with the Hero of Roses." She sighed, sitting on my bed and then falling back to lie there.

"I'm not surprised. Father thoroughly chewed me out as well," I replied. I'd earned it, but that didn't make it any more pleasant.

It was embarrassing as well. *I want to go back and punch myself in the face*, I mused, looking up at the ceiling.

"He...Makoto Takatsuki, I mean, is a wicked deity's disciple," Dahlia murmured.

"What?" I said, turning toward her before I even realized I'd moved.
"Wicked?"

"Right—the old gods that lost Titanomachia. He follows one of them."

The figure from *that time* shimmered in my mind's eye once again. The *thing* I couldn't accept as a Sacred Deity. The inhuman existence...

The old gods.

Wicked deities.

Titania.

There were many names for them, but they were anathema to the current religion. And...their disciples were treated the same way.

“Did you...tell His Majesty?” I asked.

Such a disciple had killed many heroes a thousand years ago. He’d been a mad fighter, finally taken down by Abel the Savior. The goddesses still treated it as taboo. These disciples weren’t as well-known and reviled as the Snake Sect to the general public, but they couldn’t be ignored either.

“Yes... But I also heard from Sól before I did. She said the disciple is useful this time. And also, that Eir was watching him...so it’s fine.”

“Th-That’s okay?” I asked in confusion.

Even now, knowing who he follows... I couldn’t go against him. Not with all the people praising him and Aya Sasaki. That certainly wouldn’t go well. If Sól was saying not to interfere, we wouldn’t interfere.

“We...picked a fight with the wrong person,” I lamented.

“We certainly did.”

The two of us exchanged glances again and sighed.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

I woke up to an unfamiliar ceiling, a hard bed, thin sheets, and a white room.

It was a hospital room, similar to the one in the Water Temple.

“Hm?”

My right arm felt odd... More accurately, it didn’t feel at all.

I can’t...feel my arm?

I looked and saw that it was wrapped in bandages. I tried to move it...but nothing happened.

No way, seriously?

“Makoto! You’re awake!”

Lucy came rushing over. I could see Furiae behind her.

“The princess and warrior were waiting before now. We have switched every half day,” Furiae explained.

I’d need to thank Sasa and Princess Sophia for that later.

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Four days,” replied Lucy.

“Four?!” I’d been out cold for that long? Yeah... Using *Transform* to turn into an elemental hadn’t been the best idea.

I looked at my unmoving arm again, and Furiae came over as I did.

“My knight... That arm may never be healed,” she murmured with a depressed expression.

“Oh...”

I looked at the bandage-covered appendage. It glowed faintly, and I could tell it was full of mana...enough mana that it made me doubt it was my arm. I’d transformed part of my body into an elemental, and now...

Hmm, maybe I can move it like that?

I tried using magic rather than my muscles to move my arm. There *was* still mana in it. Maybe using *Water Manipulation* would work.

“You have done well...my knight,” Furiae said, looking at me with a pitying expression as she moved closer. “It behaves like a curse...but it’s something beyond even my abilities... Therefore—”

Squish.

I couldn’t feel anything, but I had a “feeling” that I’d touched something soft. My right hand had moved.

It was resting on Furiae’s chest.

Holding tightly, apparently.

The lack of sensation meant I had no way of knowing what it felt like.



“Ah, sorry, sorry...” I said. I didn’t manage to explain that I’d messed up trying to move my arm.

“What are you doing?!” she demanded. She was immediately filled with rage and delivered a perfect roundhouse kick to my head.

“M-Makoto!” Lucy panicked, running over.

“Owowow...” It didn’t actually hurt that much. She’d probably held back because I was injured. The kick had also shown her underwear...but I had a feeling I’d get a *proper* kick if I said that. So I didn’t! *See? I can learn from my mistakes.*

“Honestly, if you want to touch someone’s boobs, you can touch mine,” Lucy said in exasperation before pushing her chest into my back. I could feel things just fine through my back...but judging from her expression, she was just messing with me.

Still, I hadn’t actually felt anything with my right hand... It’d be rude not to take Lucy up on her offer.

“Well, if you say so.” I lifted my left hand and pressed my palm against her chest, enjoying the soft sensation.

“Wha?!” Her face reddened as she squirmed. Then, she glared up at me through her eyelashes, hugging herself.

“Wh-What’s with you? You normally play it cool and don’t do anything!”

Considering how long we’d spent together, she knew me well. I’d usually be activating *Calm Mind* and doing my best to act normally. But, I’d spent a lot of time nearly dying recently. And now, I felt like following my instincts.

“Don’t think I’m the same as I used to be, Lucy,” I said with a grin. “I’m growing every day.”

“You look awfully smug for just having your hand on a girl’s chest.” Furiae sighed deeply before taking Twi with her out of the room, calling us idiots as she went.

Lucy and I were alone now. She came in closer like she was going to say something and put her face right next to my ear. “Well...then you can touch

them as much as you like,” she whispered.

“What?”

She thrust her shapely assets forward.

Come on...

“Where’d that confidence go?” Lucy teased. “You saved the capital, so you can have a girl or two.”

“Guh!”

I hadn’t expected her to be so assertive. She was *definitely* related to Rosalie. But also, she was obviously still embarrassed. Her face was bright red.

What do I do? I thought to myself.

As I did, words floated up in front of me.

Let’s fucking gooooo.

Yes

Uh, RPG Player? You only gave me one option...

But we *were* alone in the room... It wouldn’t cause her shame.

“I’ll go right ahead then,” I said, reaching out for her.

“Mmm,” Lucy murmured, moving closer to me as well.

But then—

“Takatsuki?”

Sasa! She was standing right next to me! *Wh-When’d she get there?!*

“What are you doing, Lu?” Her flat, dead tone of voice was terrifying, but Lucy didn’t seem overly concerned.

“He was all hot and bothered when he woke up,” Lucy explained. “Fuuri got annoyed at him for touching her chest, so I told him he’d have to make do with mine.”

“What?! Whaaaaat?!” Sasa demanded, eyes wide. “Takatsuki did that?! To Fuu?! What the hell?!”

“Come on, Makoto—touch Aya’s too.”

“Lu?!”

“Lucy?!”

She’s gone crazy.

Lucy looked pointedly at Sasa. “Well, you were upset because your chest hasn’t gotten any bigger, even after evolving into a lamia queen. Makoto can help with that.”

“You shouldn’t say that!” Sasa exclaimed, stuffing a hand over Lucy’s mouth.

The suggestion prompted me to glance at Sasa’s body. She looked pretty much the same as she had in our first year of high school. Well, she was technically a lamia now, but her chest size hadn’t changed.

And lamiae were often fairly busty...

Since Sasa had *Transform*, she could appear however she liked. But, her pride stopped her from magically adding any padding, so her chest stayed modest even in human form.

Sasa’s steady gaze now pointed my way. “Takatsuki...what exactly are you looking at?”

“Don’t worry! I like them (even if they’re small)!” I said with a thumbs up.

She and Lucy stared at me oddly.

“You’re acting strange,” said Lucy.

“Well, Takatsuki was strange to begin with.”

“Rude,” I complained.

“Well, whatever. I still got to hear your feelings,” Sasa said, climbing onto my bed.

“Hey, no fair,” Lucy protested...before following suit!

This bed really isn’t big enough for the three of us. Regardless, we made do

and ended up becoming somewhat noisy.

“Hero Makoto?” Princess Sophia’s frosty voice and expression cut through us like ice shards, and there was almost a physical chill coming from her smile. “You certainly seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Sasa and Lucy were still on the bed, and Sophia stared down at me like I was a pig in the abattoir. Well, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration—her face wasn’t *that* cold. It was more...exasperated.

“Hero, are you awake?” called another, deeper voice from behind her. I recognized it immediately as General Talisker. Apparently, he was here to offer his thanks on behalf of the country.

That reminds me... I’d passed out after using elemental magic, but it seemed like Gamelan was fine.

Incidentally, as soon as Sasa and Lucy had met Princess Sophia’s eyes, they’d exchanged a look between them and then...jumped out of the window... The *second-story* window...

Sasa had carried Lucy. Damn them for escaping.

“Hero, I cannot convey the depths of our gratitude,” said General Talisker. “Your efforts for the sake of Great Keith are unmatched, and your companion Aya Sasaki has become a State-Authorized Hero of our lands. I hope that our respective nations can...”

The general’s speech of thanks just kept going and going, and I felt like it was never going to end. So, I mostly let it fly in one ear and out the other.

I got the gist of it pretty quickly: Great Keith and Roses had been in very different diplomatic positions because of the relative strengths of the countries. Roses had no strong military forces, so treaties between the two countries had always been biased toward Great Keith. They were now being reevaluated, and the neighboring nations would soon be on more equal terms. They also wanted the heroes of both countries to get along.

The general finished up his speech by personally apologizing for the trouble his daughter had caused. That was more or less all of it, but he did use some roundabout phrasing and slightly difficult vocabulary in this world’s language,

which made certain things harder to understand. I'd get Princess Sophia to explain everything later.

"Hero Makoto. If you have anything you desire, name it," General Talisker said seriously.

This was the main event. I glanced at the princess—she was staring at me with trust in her eyes. If there was an issue, she'd stop me from talking, so I decided to speak up.

"General, there is one thing I want."

His eyes started gleaming. "Oh? And that is?"

"Another otherworlder—one of my friends who came from the same world as me—has become a slave. I'd like her to be released..."

Kawakita, one of my former classmates, was the slave in question. I explained who she was and that an influential noble was set to buy her.

As I spoke, the general's face creased into a frown. "I certainly seem to recall —"

"General, if I may?" Princess Sophia interrupted. "Hero Makoto, your friend Keiko Kawakita has already been freed."

"Wha—?"

Apparently, it had happened during the tournament when Sasa had broken Balamung. Sasa had destroyed one of the nation's treasures, but Great Keith was a country of fighters. And because the duel had been at Olga's behest, Balamung's destruction was considered to be her fault.

Regardless of blame, the problem still remained—the swords were powerful trump cards in the war against the demons, and humanity would need them when Iblis resurrected. Therefore, Balamung needed repairing as soon as possible. An average blacksmith wouldn't have been skilled enough—they needed a blacksmith with a saint rank skill.

Unfortunately, there were only a couple of qualified individuals on the continent, few enough to count on your fingers...and all of them were fully booked up with clients. In addition, they all possessed the rigid pride that was

characteristic of master artificers. None would be easily swayed by money, not even when offered a hefty sum by an influential country like Great Keith. The nation's leaders were all concerned that Balamung would be out of commission for the Northern Front Plan, meaning that Olga would not be able to participate in the fight.

Then, onto the scene came Fujiyan. His various connections had borne fruit—he'd convinced the best smith on the continent to clear their schedule and reforge Balamung.

The repair required expensive magicite and other reagents, but Fujiyan had procured them all. Great Keith's leadership had promised him anything within their power in return for his assistance, and Fujiyan had asked for his friend to be released.

Kawakita was now a publicly free woman, and it had all gone down before I'd woken up.

Sasa's impressive...but so's Fujiyan. He'd solved all pressing concerns, both about our classmate and the broken sword. Though...one friend had technically caused the issue for another friend to fix. It felt kinda like taking advantage... I'd have to thank Fujiyan later.

"Well, if that's the case...then I've got nothing," I said. Now that Kawakita was free, there wasn't anything I needed to worry about.

"Hrm, still..." The general didn't seem satisfied. "I shall prepare the most beautiful woman in the country for you."

"Uh?"

That...was a bit out of left field.

"General, you are bothering him," Princess Sophia interjected sharply.

"If you desire it," he continued, "I can arrange for my daughter."

His daughter... That battle maniac?

"I appreciate it, but I cannot accept." I was pretty sure he was joking, but I made sure to turn him down just in case.

His face clouded in thought for a moment, but he didn't seem to come up

with another offer. Eventually, he said, “Then we shall assist if you ever have need of it,” before turning and leaving the room.

The princess and I were alone now.

“You have earned much trust from him,” she said with a teasing look as she sat on my bed.

“He seemed really eager to please,” I replied. The last time we’d spoken, the general had been entirely focused on ferreting out my secrets.

“That is how impressive your accomplishment was,” Sophia said, softly touching my bandage-wrapped arm.

The sensation of her fingers...was nonexistent. Her face darkened in sadness.

“You cannot move this arm anymore, can you?” she asked. “I heard from Fuuri.”

Huh? That’s not quite right.

“I can.”

“You can?”

I carefully—making sure to avoid a repeat of the accidental sexual harassment from earlier—moved the arm. Water magic was my specialty, but I still wasn’t used to moving my own arm with it. It felt almost zombie-like. My arm wavered up through the air before coming to rest on her head. *Urk!* I hurriedly tried to move it off, but it wouldn’t work right.

I ended up in the rather rude position of effectively stroking her head. She didn’t shake off my hand but just looked blankly back at me.

“It has been quite a while,” she remarked.

“Uh, sorry. I can’t totally control it yet.”

I used my left hand to lift my right and remove it from her head. *Should’ve done that to begin with...*

“You should rest more,” she stated. “You’re still recovering.”

Following her request, I lay down in bed. I must have still been somewhat fatigued because as soon as I did, I started to feel drowsy. Just before I drifted

off, I could have sworn I felt a hand on *my* head.



I dreamt of a vast, endless space, the same as always. Two beautiful goddesses were present...surrounded by a mountain of documents.

“Noah? Eir?” I asked.

Eir had a hard look on her face as she signed sheets of paper. For her part, Noah was holding her head up with one hand while using the other to write. I felt awkward talking to them in this situation, but since I was here, they must have wanted to speak to me about something.

“Oh, Makoto,” Noah said, sending a smile my way. “Good for you, saving Great Keith. Your classmate’s free too.”

“Hey! Don’t stop writing! There are thousands left!” Eir scolded.

“Eir, what’s with all this stuff?” I asked. I’d never seen so much paperwork in one place.

“It’s the arrangements I had to make for Noah to visit you out in the world! It was ridiculous! Making it all hang together is so hard! We need to fool all the patrolling angels!”

“I-I see...”

It was my fault. Noah had to help me because I messed up using *Transform*. She’d come out of her prison for an instant, and Eir had arranged it.

“Come on, Eir, let’s take a break. We’ve got Häagen-Dazs.”

“Products from Earth...” I marveled. She always seemed to have that kind of thing, and I always wondered where she got them.

“Amazon and Rakuten, where else?”

They delivered here?!

“I’m having cookies and cream!” Eir exclaimed. “I won’t accept anything else.”

“I’ll have the macadamia one then,” Noah replied. She turned to me. “You can have the vanilla.”

“Uh... Right. Thank you.”

It'd been so long since I'd had Earth ice cream...and it tasted even better than I remembered.

Once we finished eating, I addressed the goddesses. “Thank you both for your help.”

Noah grinned. “No worries. It had been a while since I'd been out and about.”

“Do you know how much effort...” Eir tiredly trailed off as she noticed something. “Show me that arm!”

She grabbed hold of my right arm. Her tone was way sharper and more demanding than usual. The look in her eyes was intense as she focused on my bandaged limb.

“*Unravel*,” she said, making the bandages do exactly that. My bare arm was glowing blue. I'd taken a quick peek at it in the hospital bed...but this wasn't something I could really show people.

Eir didn't say anything, just tightly held onto me and glared. Then, she turned to Noah. “What's this supposed to be?” she demanded, lifting my arm up to show the other goddess.

There was a small mark just above my elbow—a glowing red spot among all the blue.

“It's where I touched him,” Noah said.

“Oh, right...” Noah'd grabbed me by the arm just before the comet fell... It'd felt really hot and painful.

“Noah...you gave him anima, didn't you?”

“Oops, what a klutz I am! I accidentally got him with it.”

Eir strode over to Noah and grabbed her by the collar. “Was it on purpose?!” She sounded angrier than I'd ever heard her, especially considering how soft her voice usually was.

“Come on, calm down,” Noah soothed with a vague smile.

“Answer me! You know giving someone power outside of a blessing is taboo!

Do you know what you've done?!"

"E-Eir? Calm down," I said, worried about how out of character she was acting.

But she simply turned her hard eyes to me. "Mako, your arm hasn't healed and you can't move it properly. These issues are caused by the anima. In fact, you could call that mark...a curse of the gods. It lets Noah interfere in the world through a believer... Through *you*..."

"A curse..." Furiae *had* said something about my arm being cursed.

"The Sacred Deities can't overlook that," she continued. "Althena is *really* big on the law, so if she sees it, she might wipe you out. Since you saved Great Keith she probably wouldn't just *do* it, but still... What are you trying to pull, Noah?"

"Noah?" I repeated, looking at my goddess for an explanation.

The smile on her face was as beautiful as ever.

"It's insurance, for if you'd failed at that transformation. I can't turn up every time...but my anima will let me control the elementals directly."

"I see." The technique I'd used was really risky, so some insurance didn't seem like a bad thing.

"Mako... It's not just the elementals she can control. She can also control *you*. Are you still not bothered? Plus it'll draw the attention of the Sacred Deities *and* the daemons. Honestly, it's not really worth it for a human like you."

Hmmm...

Eir sounded concerned for me. I looked between the two goddesses. My eyes met Noah's and we stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Makoto, do you trust me?" she asked.

"Of course I do."

"Then believe in me. I won't do anything bad."

With that assurance, I made my decision. "Okay."

"Hey! Hey!" Eir yelled, getting between the two of us.

“What’s the problem?” we asked in unison.

“I’ve got a whole damned *list!*” she exclaimed, pulling at her hair. “You’re okay with this?!”

“Well, Noah’s always plotting,” I replied. She’d acted like this ever since I’d first met her. I was going to help her either way, so it wasn’t worth complaining about this particular thing. Besides, if Noah hadn’t intervened, we all would’ve been flattened by that comet.

“Eir, you’re worrying too much,” Noah said. “I might have given him anima, but my power’s sealed in the temple, so I can’t do anything.”

“Hrmmmm.” Eir looked unhappily between us before eventually sighing. “Things are still peaceful, so...fine. But you’re going to be in the line of fire once Iblis is back.”

“Will that be soon?” I asked.

“Hm, according to Ira, it could be any day now.”

“It’ll probably be a few months,” Noah clarified. “There’s so much paperwork left though.”

“And whose fault is that?!”

The two goddesses went back to their work. *I suppose the anima stuff has been tabled for now...*

Just as I was thinking that I should leave them to their paperwork, I noticed things becoming hazy.



When I awoke, I was back in the hospital. It was dark outside, but I couldn’t tell how late it was without a clock. Still, it was definitely deep into the night.

I tried to get up, but my right arm wasn’t cooperating. I used my left to push myself up instead. The transformed arm was wrapped in bandages and wouldn’t move at all through physical strength.

I recalled the dream I’d just had.

There was anima from Noah in my arm, along with the mana from the

elementals. It was power from an old god... An old god who the world thought of as *evil*.

In other words, it was an *evil* god's power that I had to master.

This is the perfect time for that line, isn't it?

I gave in to the temptation and glanced around. No one was in the room.

Great.

"Be still...my aching arm," I intoned.

"What's that, Takatsuki?"

"Sasa?!"

When'd she get here? She'd been keeping an eye on me, but I really wished she hadn't hidden herself!

"N-Nothing," I said, using *Calm Mind* to feign composure.

Sasa looked at me with a grin. "Be still...my aching arm..." she muttered through the giggles.

She'd seen it all!

"Forget everything!" I yelled, trying to grab her.

She slipped away with a laughing yelp, and I spent the next few minutes enduring some merciless teasing.



"To former class 1-A!"

"Cheers!" we chorused.

Four of us—me, Fujiyan, Sasa, and Kawakita—were in a pub in the capital.



Sasa had said that we needed a reunion to celebrate Kawakita's freedom. Fujiyan and I had no objections, of course.

"Thank you all," Kawakita said with an embarrassed giggle. "You helped me so much."

"Good for you, Keiko!" Sasa cheered, glomming onto her.

The girls chatted for a while before Kawakita turned to me suddenly. "You negotiated with one of the higher-ups for me, didn't you? Thanks."

"You'd already been freed when I did that," I deflected, scratching my cheek. "Thank Fujiyan and Sasa."

"We never talked in class though," she pointed out. "I've known Michio for years, and Aya's a friend. You're a good guy." She offered me a cute smile.

Kawakita had been a bit of a diva in school—she'd always spoken rather harshly, so I'd been a bit wary of her. But now that we were talking, I realized that she was a surprisingly nice girl.

"I could not have done it alone," Fujiyan said. "It was due to Lady Sasaki's breaking of the sword that I was able to indebt Great Keith."

"I think arranging to get the sword fixed was harder," Sasa said.

He guffawed. "An acquaintance's acquaintance happens to know a suitable smith. It was luck, really."

I knew better. This was how he always talked his way around the crazy stuff he did. He had way too many connections!

After that, we spent some time just chatting about the struggles we'd faced in this world as well as reminiscing about back home. Kawakita and Sasa were both unhappy at the lack of sweet treats in this world. That reminded me of how tasty the Häagen-Dazs had been.

On the whole, Great Keith's cooking was really spicy. This pub had kebabs as a specialty, along with pepper soups. I was pretty fond of it all.

By now, we'd all enjoyed the food and drink and were getting fairly tipsy. Kawakita took the opportunity to ask a question.

“Hey, Michio. Do you have a partner?”

She was leaning drunkenly—or more accurately, *temptingly*—against him.

Oh?

Sasa and I exchanged glances before checking that Nina wasn’t around.

“Well...how to put it?” Fujiyan replied.

He didn’t have a girlfriend. But he *did* have two wives.

For how well he usually spoke, Fujiyan was fumbling over his words now. Kawakita didn’t seem to notice; she just stared at him heatedly.

“You know...I acted tough, but I was so scared that some noble I didn’t know was going to buy me...” admitted Kawakita. “I’m really grateful...and you’re a noble in Roses now, right? I don’t have anywhere to go, so...”

“Y-You are welcome for as long as you wish, Lady Kawakita!” blurted Fujiyan. “I will happily have you as a guest!”

“Come on... Call me Kei like you used to.”

Oooh.

This was bad. Fujiyan was getting the moves put on him, despite being a married man.

His eyes roamed across the room. I had to help my friend!

“Keiko, Keiko,” Sasa said. She got to her first and leaned in close to her friend’s ear.

I used *Listen*...not that it really mattered if I heard.

“Fujiwara already has two wives,” Sasa whispered.

There was a long pause as Kawakita froze.

“What?”

Yeah... Her reaction was about what I’d expect. It must’ve been shocking to find out that the guy you were interested in was already taken.

I was honestly surprised that Fujiyan hadn’t already told her. When I glanced over at him, he looked really awkward.

Yup, figures.

“O-Oh...! Right! I see!” Kawakita’s face was cherry red. She looked almost like she was about to cry.

How sad...

“What’s that look for?!” she demanded, snapping her gaze toward me.

“Nothing!” Scary! That was just like the *old* Kawakita!

“Aya!” she cried out. “We’re drinking the night away!”

“Huh? R-Right! Sure!”

Kawakita drained her ale to hide her embarrassment. Sasa did the same with her wine.

Sasa...you know that wine and ale have really different amounts of alcohol, right?

The girls proceeded to go on a bender, draining glass after glass. Fujiyan and I just slowly made our way through our own glasses in the corner. Kawakita’s declaration that she would “drink the night away” ended up proving true—we stayed at the pub until it started getting light outside.

I didn’t really remember the end of the night...but it felt like I was back in school, and I had a really good time.

And thus, our adventures in Great Keith came to an end.

Epilogue: A Hero's Work

"You...want us to take out an ancient dragon?" Sasa and I asked in unison.

Our party had been close to leaving Great Keith when an envoy arrived, asking us for aid.

"We are aware of the danger, but if our new hero Lady Aya Sasaki could eliminate the ancient dragon that nests within our lands..."

"And that's something we have to do?" I asked. Great Keith's State-Authorized Heroes were made up of countless strong veterans, so why did the newest one have to do it?

"The extinction of the sand dragons has caused an ecological shift in the desert, leading to a rise in the ancient dragon's activity."

Sasa and I exchanged wordless glances. Sand dragons were calamity-level drakes that had lived in the deserts of Great Keith. Incidentally, Sasa was the one who'd changed their status from "lived" to "had lived."

"A full hero would be required against an ancient dragon, so this would usually fall to Lady Olga. However, an accident several days ago damaged her holy sword..."

Sasa looked away awkwardly. Though the envoy had glossed over the details, Sasa was definitely the one who'd broken it. The man was probably well aware of that fact.

"Oh! How shall we face such a beast while our hero is useless?" he lamented exaggeratedly.

You know...it's obvious you're acting, right? Also, should you be calling your hero useless? Well, these people really were in a bind, and we were the ones who had caused it. I suppose we don't have a choice.

"I-I'll do it..." Sasa conceded in defeat.

"Truly?! Thank you, Lady Aya! There will be a suitable reward for your

assistance!” he said, overjoyed. Then, he left.

It really felt like we’d been taken advantage of... Still, we had accepted, so now we’d have to follow through.

Time to fight an ancient dragon.



“Argh! It’s so hot! How far *is* it?!” Furiae demanded, pulling her dress away from her chest and fanning herself.

It was midway through our journey to the ancient dragon. We were traveling in a vehicle dragged behind several massive birds—they were at least three times bigger than ostriches. This was apparently the fastest way to traverse the desert.

“Princess, that’s immodest,” I warned since Furiae was showing too much of her chest.

“My knight, I should be the least of your concerns,” she replied, pointing to Lucy.

The elf was slumped out flat. Her top was tied only around her chest, leaving her stomach bare, and her skirt had been rolled up around her hips—it’d ended up no longer than a micro miniskirt. In fact, it was just on the verge of showing her underwear...and from my position, they *were* visible.

“You okay, Lucy?” I asked.

“Makoto... I’m...melting...”

Well, at least she was conscious. Sasa was fanning her. I stuck my hand into one of the large water containers in the carriage.

“Water elementals,” I murmured. At my request, they filled the area with a cooling breeze.

“Oh? That’s much nicer,” Furiae remarked.

“Makotoooo,” whined Lucy, “why didn’t you do that sooner?”

“Cause it won’t last long. Give it a few minutes and it’ll be just as bad.” Also, the water elementals weren’t particularly cooperative in the heat.

“Doesn’t the heat bother you?” Sasa—the newly minted State-Authorized Hero—asked me.

“*Calm Mind* helps me to be mostly fine with it,” I replied.

“Okay. I actually like the heat.”

Indeed, she hadn’t even broken a sweat—lamiae were right at home in scorching temperatures.

“Argh, it’s already heating up again. I hate the sweat in my hair,” Furiae complained.

“I can’t take it anymore!!!” Lucy yelled “It’s coming off! All of it!”

Sasa reached out to stop her. “You can’t do that! The driver’s up front!”

A tamer woman was controlling the birds drawing the carriage. She looked like a normal person but was apparently pretty strong. Considering this was a request from a military country, it made sense that our guide was from the military as well.

After that commotion died down, we spent about another half-day in the shifting carriage.



“Is this the place?” I asked.

We were now in a town that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. It had been built around an oasis, and I spotted many carriages that were similar to ours.

“This town is Tobermory, one of the centers of Great Keith’s trade,” our tamer guide told us.

Now all the carriages made sense.

“Lodgings have been prepared. This way, Hero Aya.”

Our guide showed us to an inn on the shores of the lake in the center of the oasis. Inn or not, it was completely different from the lodgings in Macallan—this place had pure-white walls and looked more like a resort than anything.

As we entered, a line of suited butlers and maids greeted us. “Hero Aya, we

welcome you and your party.”

“U-Uh...” stammered Sasa. “This place is...”

“To aid in your battle against the ancient dragon, we have prepared the best lodgings available in Tobermory. The inn is fully reserved to avoid hindering your work.”

“Umm...how much...”

“Great Keith is, of course, covering the bill. Lady Aya, please just concentrate on defeating the ancient dragon.”

“R-Right...”

The lavishness of the place was overwhelming Sasa. She was certainly getting the real VIP treatment. *Well, she is a hero.*

One of the employees guided us to our rooms, their posture dead-straight.

“It’s huge,” Lucy exclaimed when we arrived.

The room was obviously a suite and it was laughably large. That wasn’t all, though. The furniture and decorations were definitely high-class.

“Takatsuki,” Sasa said, tugging at my arm. “Can we really use a room like this?”

“It’s not much different to what we got in Cameron, is it?” I asked.

“Well, that was for you! This one’s for me. It’s kinda scary...”

Ah, that made sense. The room was reserved in *her* name, because of *her*—that fact seemed to have prevented her from relaxing. I definitely understood her hesitation.

“Aya, Fuuri!” came a yell from Lucy. “Look, there’s a pool!”

“A pool?!” came the chorus in response.

Surely that was too much of a luxury for a place where water was so precious... But no...there was a large open area containing a huge pool.

“Let’s swim!” Lucy exclaimed, stripping down.

I was a bit worried she was going to go skinny dipping, but there were swimsuits available in the room.

“I guess I’ll join in too,” Sasa said, starting to pick out a swimsuit. “You too, Fuu.”

“Uh... Do I...also need to wear one...? They’re somewhat...” Furiae seemed much more hesitant and lost. She glanced at me every so often as she spoke. *What’s with that?*

“Are you embarrassed to wear one in front of Makoto?” Lucy asked.

“Tee hee.” Sasa giggled. “You’re surprisingly innocent.”

“Wha?! And what of it?!” snapped Furiae. “My knight has been leering at me this whole time!”

That was unfair *and* excessive!

“I don’t care what you wear,” I told her. “I’m going to look around the town.” They’d find it hard to change with me around anyway, so I decided to be the gentleman and leave.

“Hold it!” Lucy said. “You’re always going off on your own.”

“Takatsukiiii, let’s swim together.”

Before I knew what was going on, Lucy and Sasa had grabbed hold of me.

“Where do you think you’re going while I’m so defenseless?!” Furiae demanded. “I cannot believe you! You need to stay!”

What happened to not being allowed to look? Either way, we all ended up in the pool.

“Ahhh, this is so nice...” Lucy sighed, paddling around in her red swimsuit. She was using a swim ring, and she looked like she was enjoying herself. Considering how bad the journey here had been for her, the oasis must’ve felt like heaven.

Suddenly, there was a massive splash. I looked around and saw Sasa leaping up like a dolphin in her striped swimsuit. She was way too good at swimming... It made sense for her race, though.

“Umm... What should I do...?” Furiae asked, walking carefully up to the side of

the pool and getting in. It seemed as though she couldn't really swim. Also, I didn't know what kind of swimsuit *she* was wearing.

"I'll teach you!" Sasa exclaimed, surging over like a fish.

"You're too good at swimming to help a newbie," Lucy remarked. "I'll teach—Huh?" As she came over, she noticed something that cut off her train of thought.

"You're still wearing your clothes?" Sasa asked.

"You won't be able to float like that," added Lucy.

"What?! I won't!"

Wearing the swimsuit must have been too embarrassing for Furiae, so she still had a shirt on over it. There was no way she'd manage to swim like that.

"Nrow, nrow," came Twi's contribution.

"Oh, you can swim?" I asked. Even the cat was splashing through the water in a dog-paddle...a kitty-paddle? Didn't cats hate the water? Maybe not in this world?

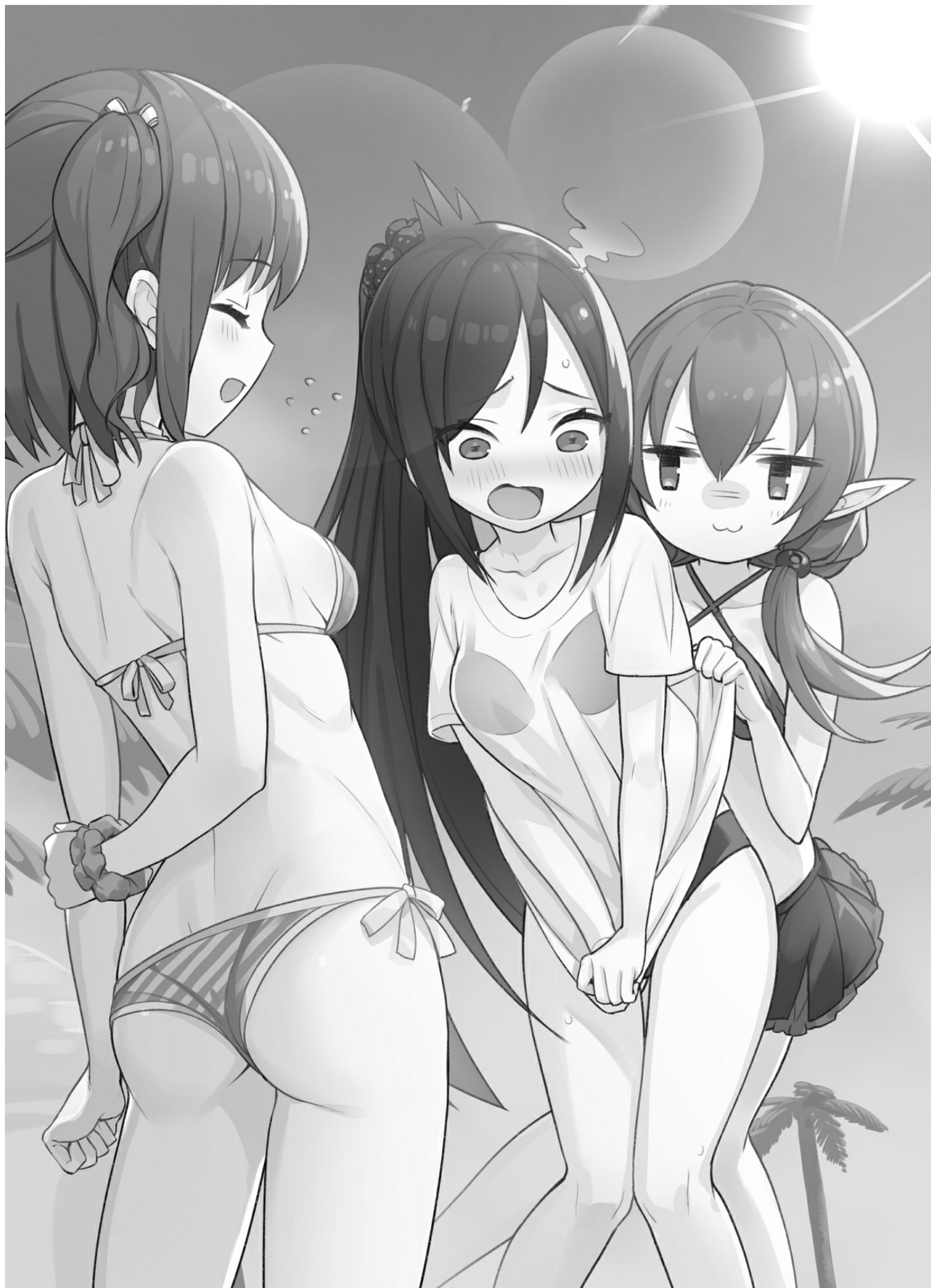
"Come on, off it comes," Lucy cajoled.

"Wait! I can do it myself!"

"You'll never take it off," Sasa argued. "I'll hold her down, you get the clothes off, Lu!"

"Gotcha! Give it up, Fuuri."

"Let me go!" cried Furiae. "You'll take the swimsuit with it...! Ah, no, stop..."



The peerless beauty Furiae was surrounded by two other beauties—Lucy and Sasa. They proceeded to strip off her top. It was a pleasant sight.

Not going to join in? Noah asked.

You don't get it, Noah. It's such a nice scene because there're only cute girls involved. A guy can't get into the middle of that.

That sagely tone is really annoying...

She didn't seem to agree with me.

"Ahhhh! I'll take it off! I will!" shouted Furiae.

"Great! Now you're in a proper swimsuit!"

The yelp had been less than sexy, but Lucy was currently holding Furiae's removed T-shirt.

"Give it back!" Furiae protested, trying to get out of Sasa's hold, but her struggle was to no avail—she wasn't going to beat a lamia queen in a contest of physical strength.

"Makoto, catch!" Lucy yelled, launching all of Furiae's shed clothes my way. The cloth was saturated and really heavy, so I used water magic to dry everything out.

Then, when I went to fold the clothes, I noticed something.

"Huh?"

Something else was caught in the bundle. The cloth was purple, different from the rest, and the garment was shaped like two upright bowls.

"Ah..." came a noise of realization from Lucy and Sasa.

A moment later, I realized what it was: they'd torn off her swimsuit along with the clothes.

Before I could turn to look at Furiae, she barked out a curse.

"All of you, *Sleep!!!*"

I didn't even have time to think about how sleeping in the water was dangerous—we all instantly passed out.

When I came to, Lucy and Sasa were apologizing for going too far. I was lying on a sofa, and the other two were kneeling in front of Furiae in the middle of the room.

Furiae was peering down at them with her legs crossed, an angry look on her face. Seeing that, I stood and walked over, deciding to mediate.

"It doesn't really matter though," Lucy insisted.

"Yeah, it was such a cute swimsuit!" said Sasa.

"You two!"

Lucy and Sasa didn't seem all *that* apologetic. As I listened, I could practically see the vein pulsing in Furiae's temple.

"Guys, apologize properly," I said.

Furiae was the first to react. "M-M-My knight?! You're awake?!" She backed off with brightly flushed cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're all red."

"And whose fault is that?! I've had enough of the pool. I'm going shopping. Come with me," Furiae demanded.

"Right, Princess," I replied, obeying my liege's commands.

"That's not fair!" Lucy protested.

"I'm coming too!" Sasa added.

"You two will stay here!" declared Furiae. "It's your punishment."

After what'd happened in the pool, Lucy and Sasa couldn't really argue, so they just slumped sadly.

"We're buying clothes," were Furiae's first words as we stepped out into the town. The dark dresses she usually wore must have been too hot, so we browsed store after store, anyplace we could find that sold clothes.

Furiae hummed as she perused the different outfits. When we'd first arrived

in Great Keith, she'd been adamant about never wearing something so revealing. But apparently, she now thought much more kindly of sparser attire. It must have been the country's style—a lot of the clothing here was airy and colorful. And, when the greatest mortal beauty wore that attire, she turned quite a few heads.

Furiae ended up trying on over thirty outfits and buying seven of them.

"Shopping is so much fun!" she exclaimed.

"I'm just glad you're in a good mood again."

"I was in a good mood from the start." She had a lot more pep in her step now than when we'd left.

We took a break, sipping tropical drinks and munching on some local snacks. By the time we returned to the inn, it was nearly evening.

While Furiae seemed utterly satisfied, Lucy and Sasa—who'd stayed in all day—were in quite the opposite mood...and cheering *them* up had taken even more effort...

◇ That Night ◇

"Is this where the ancient dragon appears?" I asked our tamer guide. She would be accompanying us for the entire trip.

"Yes. This is where it has appeared for the last half a month."

That date coincided with the sand dragons' destruction. It seemed like this ancient dragon was an aftereffect of that.

"Does Tobermory not have an adventurer's guild?" Lucy asked.

I was curious as well.

"It does, along with Temple Knights tasked with keeping order. However, while they can face normal monsters and bandits, an ancient dragon is beyond them."

Well, yeah...that figured. Macallan was way larger than this town and even we would have been wiped out by an ancient dragon.

"Right! Then I'll just pound it back when it comes out!" Sasa declared, rolling

her sleeves up.

She seemed so reliable, and the tamer was captivated. "I saw you in the tournament...but now I get to see you fight up close..." The tournament winners were almost holy existences to the warriors of Great Keith. It seemed like the tamer was head over heels for Sasa.

Now, all we needed to do was wait.

"My knight, it seems like the ancient dragon will not be present tonight," Furiae remarked.

The rest of us uttered noises of confusion as we looked at her.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I saw the future. In my vision, the warrior was saying that she waited all night and it didn't appear. She looked exhausted."

So...it wouldn't be here today?

"Uh, Miss?" I asked the tamer. "How frequently does it appear?"

"Um...roughly...one in every three days."

You could have said that at the start! It seemed like we were going to be stuck in this town for a while...

"I'm heading back to bed then," Furiae said with a wave. "Good night."

"Ah... Is she always right?" the tamer asked uneasily.

"Fuu's pretty much always on the mark, huh?" Sasa said.

"Most of the time, yes, but not always..." I replied. The future wasn't absolute. Which meant... "It probably won't show, but we should wait just in case."

Lucy and Sasa already looked tired as they protested. The tamer seemed ready to cry as well.

"We'll keep watch in turns," I suggested.

"R-Right...thanks."

We paired off to wait through the night. And...just as Furiae had foreseen, we

saw neither hide nor tail of the ancient dragon.



“My knight, this meal is delicious!” Furiae exclaimed over breakfast.

She was probably so much more energetic than the rest of us because *she’d* gotten a full night’s sleep. Lucy and Sasa were exhausted. I was too, but an RPG player couldn’t spend the day sleeping after arriving at a new town.

No, seriously. Sleep if you’re tired, Noah jabbed.

Still, I didn’t stop. “I’m going to walk around the town.”

“You’re going out?” Lucy asked. “I’ll come with.”

“Me too!” Sasa cheered.

But then, someone interjected to rain on our parade.

“I apologize, Lady Aya,” the tamer said, looking like she meant it, “but the lord of Tobermory has invited you to a welcoming party...”

“What?!” Sasa yelled in dismay.

This was another aspect of being a hero—you had to go through all the formalities. Sasa put up a bit of a fight but ended up going off with the tamer.

“Then it’s my turn today!” Lucy exclaimed, tugging at my hand.

I looked over at Furiae to see what she’d do. She was reclining on the sofa, playing with Twi.

“It’s hot outside. I’m taking a break. Enjoy yourselves.” She waved at us.

Well, since she didn’t fancy coming out, today would be a date with Lucy.

“So hot...” Lucy moaned. We’d only left a few minutes ago.

“Want to head back?” I asked. The inn had cooling magic that kept it comfortable even during the day.

“No! That’d be giving up!”

I didn’t entirely understand her logic... Staying in the sun would certainly be tough for her.

“Shall we go to the lake?” I asked. “It might be a bit cooler.”

“Maybe... Though with how hot it is, even that will probably be boiling.”

“Well, it’ll be better than here.”

I tugged the skeptical girl along to the lake in the middle of the oasis. It was apparently open to the public because there were plenty of families and couples around the water. We followed their example, taking our shoes off and stepping into the water.

“Wah!” Lucy yelped. “It’s cold.”

“It really is.” The water was actually cooler than body temperature—perfect for refreshing ourselves in the heat.

“Makoto!” Lucy yelled, scooping up water and splashing me with it.

Huh. Challenging me with water sure was brave.

“Water Magic: Water Whale.”

A massive splash rose up as I created an enormous whale out of water. Lucy squealed as it hit her. *Whoops*. I hurriedly yanked her up.

“What are you playing at?!” she demanded, smacking at me. Still, she was smiling rather than being actually angry.

“I know. It’s been a while—let’s do this again.”

She squawked in confusion as I grabbed hold of her hand. I then created a current of water on the lake’s surface. We rocketed off like a Jet Ski.

“Waaah! This takes me back!” she exclaimed. “It’s the spell you used in Macallan, right?”

“Yeah. I used it when we got rid of the goblins.”

“Oh yeah... Goblin Cleaner, wasn’t it?”

“Forget that name already,” I protested.

As we chatted, we reached a little island in the middle of the lake. It was covered in palm trees, and the shade made it more comfortable. The two of us lay beneath the palm canopy to take a break. Though the sun was still beating

down, the shadows were much cooler.

In fact, it was comfortable...and I could feel myself dozing off. Just as my eyes had drifted closed, I felt something lean into me.

As I muttered something about Lucy not sleeping tidily, I opened my eyes again. She was right in front of me.

"Makoto..." she murmured.

"Lu—mph."

Her lips covered mine before I could get a full word out. After a *long* kiss, she looked temptingly down at me.

"There's no one on this island, is there?" she whispered into my ear.

"Nah. Someone might own it, but no one lives here."

I could feel her chest pressed against me.

"No one can see us, can they?"

"Well, it's a few hundred meters to shore... As long as they're not using *Clairvoyance*, they shouldn't be able to."

Her hands began to slowly pull my clothes off.

"Uh, Lucy?"

"Well, we haven't gotten time for just us in ages."

That's 'cause you're always with Sasa though...

"It was just the two of us in Macallan," I commented.

"I regret missing the chance now. I should have made a move when I watched you bathing in the Great Forest..."

"We didn't have that kind of relationship back then," I replied. What she'd said was kinda extreme.

"We do now, don't we?" Her smile was alluring.

"Well, yeah."

We *were* together now. Her nose almost touched mine as she spoke.

“Don’t worry... I’ll take the lead—huh?” She broke off, noticing something, and turned around.

I followed her gaze but could only see the lake. There were people on the shore, but I couldn’t tell who.

“A-Aya...”

Lucy’s stutter prompted me to use *Clairvoyance*—I saw Sasa surrounded by a bunch of important-looking people. Apparently, the party to welcome her was happening on the terrace of a lakeside restaurant. Sasa was staring steadily at us.

“She spotted us,” I observed.

“Ugh, she’s glaring.”

So, instead of our original plan, we just relaxed on the island. After that, we stopped by a few shops and headed back to the inn.

Sasa was there, imposingly waiting. The second she spotted Lucy, she said, “We’re talking!”

“Aya, that hurts!” Lucy protested as she was dragged to our room.

I heard some arguing, but I couldn’t tell exactly what was said.

“What’s going on? They’re fighting? Shouldn’t you stop them?” Furiae asked, obviously confused.

“Ah, well...”

I couldn’t tell her I was the cause of the argument. Fortunately, not half an hour later, they came back hand in hand. *I guess they’ve made up...*

◇ The Second Night ◇

“What’s the outlook tonight, Princess?” I asked.

“Uh...wait a moment.”

Furiae frowned in thought. That was her expression when looking into the future?

“Ah! It’ll be here!” she declared.

“Really?!”

The tamer had the loudest reaction. As part of Great Keith’s military, she must have felt bad making one of their State-Authorized Heroes stay up all night for nothing.

“I saw the warrior covered in blood,” Furiae stated. “She definitely fought the ancient dragon.”

Sasa seemed baffled. “What? I’m covered in blood?”

“Sasa got hurt?” I asked. That was bad. We needed to do something to prevent injury.

“Don’t worry,” Furiae assured us. “It was all splash back—she wasn’t hurt.”

“That’s good.” At least it wasn’t serious.

“No, it’s not!” Sasa protested.

I guess getting covered in blood wouldn’t be nice.

“W-Well...good luck,” said Lucy.

But Sasa grabbed her arm as she tried to sidle away. “Nope! You’re coming with me.”

“Why are you holding me? Let go!” Lucy exclaimed.

“You’re in this with me!”

“I don’t wanna get covered in blood!”

The two of them ended up making quite a bit of noise while we waited for the dragon. Furiae stayed with us this time. Like yesterday, we split into two groups and took turns keeping watch.

We were more tense tonight, wondering when it would appear, but...

It never showed.

“Uh, *Princess?*” I asked meaningfully as the sky started to brighten.

“I-I can’t help it... The future isn’t absolute...and forcing visions often causes them to fail! My visions are usually accurate if they just randomly appear to me.”

That was way too inconvenient... Regardless, the second day in town ended without us getting anywhere.

◇ The Third Day ◇

“So sleepy...”

“I can’t take anymore...”

Furiae was going to go back to bed after breakfast—she wasn’t used to late-night adventuring. It was also our second day running around, so Lucy had decided to do the same.

“Then you’re coming out with me today, Takatsuki!” Sasa exclaimed. She was the only one with any real energy now. Well, that’s a lamia queen for you—her stamina’s on a different level.

“Where to?” I asked.

“How do you still have energy?” Furiae asked, looking quizzically at me.

“I train every day,” I replied.

I’d always been like this whenever a new RPG came out—three sleepless nights was honestly nothing to me. Even so, I *was* still a bit tired.

Is that something to be proud of? I heard Noah ask.

It’s fine.

“Let’s go,” Sasa said, pulling me out into Tobermory again.

I’d been wondering where we were going, but apparently “out of town” was the answer. We soon left the oasis and gazed down at the town from the sand dunes. It’d seemed huge while we were inside, but looking at it from the outside, Tobermory was surprisingly small, probably only half the size of Macallan.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” Sasa asked.

“What brought that on?” I questioned.

“Well, it’s a center for trade and tourism, but the ancient dragon is pushing merchants away from the town. And, no one wants to come on holiday when there’s a dragon around...”

“Right...”

I’d thought the town was pretty lively, but apparently, this wasn’t what it was normally like.

“The lord and head of commerce were both practically begging me to get rid of the dragon,” she continued. “I told them I’d try...but the pressure is real.”

“Sasa...” She’d been acting as energetic as ever so I hadn’t noticed, but she’d actually been feeling more sensitive than usual.

“Also, the tamer who’s helping us has a poor family and lots of siblings. She’s trying to secure a good career so she can feed them all, but it looks like that hinges on our success...”

“I-I see...”

No wonder she’d been constantly urging Sasa—her appraisal depended on it.

We had—at least, technically—been on an adventure together over the past few days. Problems always weighed the heaviest when they concerned people close to you.

“You’re like my senior with all this hero stuff, right?” she asked. “What should I do?”

That was a hard question.

“Well, if it was me...”

After I’d become the State-Authorized Hero of Roses, I’d more or less just carried on like a regular adventurer. I thought back to the first *real* job I’d had as a hero. I suppose it must’ve been...the revolt and stampede in Highland? Though, back then, I’d ended up as a guardian knight working together with the Soleil Knights. We’d been so overwhelmed that I hadn’t really gotten time to worry about my place as a hero.

My next job had been in Macallan—the ancient dragon and monster stampede. Macallan was my home though, so I hadn’t really thought about the whole hero thing before jumping in to defend it. I’d just gotten embroiled immediately.

The most recent job had been in Springrogue, when we’d stopped the demon

lord Bifrons from being resurrected. Eir had given me that tip-off as a divine revelation, so I hadn't been able to worry about whether or not to take it.

You always just get dragged into things, Noah sniped.

She was right... Things just sort of ended up that way. However, that mentality wouldn't help Sasa.

H-Hmm... I need something that works as advice. We need to be careful when adventuring, so...

That reminded me—Princess Sophia had mentioned that she wanted to accompany us when I gave the report about this dragon. She'd been pretty sad to realize that her work schedule wouldn't let her assist us.

"I need to pick up a souvenir for her," I muttered to myself.

That prompted Sasa to shoot me a flat look. "Well, that does remind me... You're given jobs by your *girlfriend* Sophie. Of course you don't feel any pressure."

Damn it. That'd been a slip of the tongue. "Let's go find something nice to eat," I said. "It's hot just staying out here."

"Just how blatantly can you change the subject?" she asked, but in the end, she still agreed.

At that, we looked around for a good place to eat.

"Hero! Are you looking for something?!"

"Let me guide you!"

"This way!"

Within moments, people working for the lord appeared in front of Sasa and escorted us to a fancy place.

"We have already paid, so please order what you wish," they said before leaving.

Sasa and I exchanged wordless looks. I could see how this would put pressure on her, and we didn't end up eating much because of the atmosphere. When things were like this, everything seemed more tiring.

So...I came up with an idea: Sasa used *Transform* to disguise herself as an elf.

When I asked “why an elf?” she said that constantly being around Lucy made it easier to visualize. She also mentioned knowing what part of Lucy’s body was most sensitive...but I thought that was a bit *too* much information.

Regardless, the disguise meant that the lord’s subordinates didn’t fawn over us. After wandering around shopping for a while, we headed into a back-alley bar. There, we ordered some meats and cheeses and drinks. Ale for me—a cocktail for Sasa.

“It’s not normally just the two of us in these places,” she commented.

“Isn’t it?”

“Nope. We’re usually with at least someone else. This is more like a date. It’s fun.” The look on her face seemed almost relieved, like she’d been freed from the pressure.

The bar seemed pretty popular since there were plenty of customers besides us. The seats soon filled up. I could see the odd adventurer among them, and I heard plenty of talk about the ancient dragon.

Well, it was the (literal) talk of the town, so hearing gossip wasn’t much of a surprise. I wanted to do something about the beast, but it hadn’t shown up yet.

“Takatsuki, shall we head back?” Sasa asked after a while.

“Yeah. We’ll find it tonight.”

So, we paid our bill and left.

Lucy was waiting outside when we got back. I’d thought she was coming to greet us, but she seemed slightly...off. Her eyebrows rose and she glared at me.

“Who’s this girl?!” she demanded.

“This girl? What...? Oh.”

Oh. Right. Sasa still looked like an elf girl.

“Out of all the girls you could’ve chosen to cheat with, you pick an *elf*?! I can’t believe you!”

That's *what she's angry about?*

"Wait, Lucy, this is—" before I could explain, the girl at my side hugged me.

"I had fun today, Takatsuki. We should do this again≡"

Then she—without letting the disguise go—kissed me.

S-Sasa?!

It didn't stop there—her long tongue snaked its way into my mouth and started entwining with my own.

It's so long... Is it 'cause she's a lamia? I managed to think.

Lucy's face had gone bright red, and she stood shaking. I needed to say something...but Sasa's kiss had been too good. I couldn't come up with anything.

"How was it?" Sasa asked. Even in disguise, I knew that slightly shy look definitely belonged to Sasa.

"It was great," I answered honestly. Though, it did feel like I was forgetting something...

Hm? There's a lot of mana next to me.

"You piece of crap! *Firebaaaaall!*"

Lucy totally lost her cool and launched a huge fireball the size of a house.

Crap!

"Lu! Wait! It's me!" Sasa blurted, hurriedly turning back to normal.

"Huh? What? Aya? Why were you an elf?"

"Lucy, do something about the fire first!" I yelled.

She'd nearly blasted the whole inn away...

◇ The Third Night ◇

"It will definitely show up tonight!"

"Yes!"

Sasa rolled up her sleeves as she cheered. The tamer had said it appeared

once every three days, so tonight seemed likely.

“What exactly did you see in your vision?” Lucy asked Furiae.

“Well, the warrior was covered in blood, just like yesterday. So were you.”

“What?!” Lucy cried. “I was covered in blood?!”

“Don’t worry, it was all splash back. Neither of you were actually hurt.”

“I don’t want to be covered in blood to begin with!” Sasa protested.

“Why was I as well?!”

Lucy and Sasa looked unhappy. And...yeah, of course they were.

“What about me?” I asked.

“I didn’t say? I cannot see your future at all.”

Right. It was hard to see my future because I believed in Noah so strongly.

It’s a good thing! Noah insisted.

It is? I wanted her to look at my future as well.

I’ll guide you anyway!

My goddess was puffing her chest out. Cute. Still, I really wanted the ancient dragon to show up today.

Then, suddenly, it happened.

The sky went dark.

I thought it was a cloud at first, but no...*something’s* shadow passed slowly over us.

Then, with a thump, it landed quietly in the sand.

“Is that...?”

“It is... The Jade Dragon that has lived in Great Keith since ancient times.”

The dragon was huge, with gorgeous green scales. It closed its eyes and lay back on the sand.

“What is it doing?” I asked.

“We do not know. It hasn’t attacked the town, but it appears here every three days or so, and the townspeople are completely terrified...”

“What are we doing, Makoto? Want me to attack with magic first?” Lucy asked, lifting her staff.

Well...

“Let’s get closer.”

Unlike in Macallan, the ancient dragon wasn’t attacking the town. In fact, it looked like it was sleeping. We slowly approached it. When we were about thirty meters away, I heard a voice.

“Adventurers?” came a low rumble.

It took me a moment to realize—that was the dragon’s voice.

“You desire the fame of my defeat... Reckless adventurers. Very well, I shall face you.”

I felt the mana around the ancient dragon increase. Damn it, we had to fight?!

“I am Aya Sasaki, Hero of Great Keith! I have nothing against you, but I’ll take you down!” Sasa called, her aura surrounding her body.

A lamia queen’s aura had made even dragons flee. This particular dragon was ancient though, over a thousand years old, so it had no effect at all.

Sasa carefully approached it. She hadn’t yet activated her trump card, *Super Star*. That skill had a time limit, so it was best used once Sasa knew the strength of her opponent.

“Fire Magic (King Rank): Phoenix.”

Lucy chanted the king rank spell and created a phoenix of fire. It was about the same size as the dragon, and even bigger than she’d managed in Highland. Her mana capacity didn’t seem to know any limits. She hadn’t evolved like Sasa, but she also hadn’t stopped growing.

“Young elf. You are quite the mage for your age,” the dragon praised.

“What are you doing, my knight?” Furiae asked.

Lucy and Sasa could probably manage alone, but I was technically the party

leader. So, I lifted the arm I'd turned into an elemental the other day. I still couldn't control it perfectly... However, I slowly refined the mana, making sure that it didn't spiral out of control.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly...

"xxxxxxxxx? (You called?)" a blue-skinned woman asked as she appeared, twisting around my arm. It was Undyne. She'd been showing up a lot lately... Her body was surrounded by thick, dense mana.

"Ah...ahhhh...can't breathe..." the tamer sputtered. She fell to her knees, reeling from mana sickness.

"Are you okay?" Furiae asked, supporting her.

"xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx? (Undyne, can you rein in the mana around you?)" I asked.

Undyne looked awkwardly back at me. "xxxxxxx (I cannot make it any weaker.)"

This ridiculous amount of mana was the *least* she could manage. These minor adjustments were the elementalists' fault...my fault. The previously clear sky was suddenly covered in thick clouds.

It started to rain, definitely due to Undyne's influence. Lucy and Sasa looked at me in exasperation. I hadn't *meant* to change the weather...

Oh well. We'd just have to fight like this.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! Are you an elementalist?!" The dragon had sounded majestic, but its voice was now panicked. It was so different that, for a moment, I was confused about who the voice belonged to...before realizing it was the same dragon.

"Yeah...I am..."

"A water elementalist...with...Undyne..." The dragon started to shiver.

What on Earth?

"Takatsuki!"

"Don't you think the dragon's acting weird?"

Sasa and Lucy had both rushed over to me. Lucy had stopped her chant.

“Maybe it can’t deal well with water magic?” I suggested. “I’ll try getting Undyne to attack—”

But that was as far as I got.

“I surrender! Please don’t kill me!”

“What?” we all asked flatly in unison.



“A legend, dating back over a thousand years—never make an enemy of an elementalist controlling Undyne.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I know not. I simply heard it from my acquaintances. Even those stronger than me have quaked in fear.”

“Huh...” The elementalist who’d inspired the legend and frightened the dragons must have really been something.

Hmmm... An elementalist from a thousand years ago...

“Lucy, do you think it was your great-grandfather?” I asked. Johnnie Walker the Spellbow had also used elemental magic as he’d fought alongside Abel the Savior.

“Maybe...” she replied. “He usually used his sword and bow, though. I don’t know whether he was *that* skilled with elemental magic.”

Maybe not, then. I guess it didn’t really matter if we managed to avoid a fight.

“Why are you here?” Sasa asked the dragon.

On the other hand, *that* was definitely something we needed to know.

“For the oasis water. It holds mana desert fish. I was hunting them.”

“Desert fish?” we asked in unison, not having heard about them.

“These.”

“Wah!”

“What is that?”

The ancient dragon used its massive foreleg to heft a white fish—about a meter long—toward us. It flopped around on the sand before trying to slip beneath it. The dragon’s tongue shot out and wrapped around its scaly body before swallowing it whole.

S-So...that’s how they were eaten.

“The sand dragons used to eat all the fish around here. Now that they are gone, hunting them is much easier.”

“I see.”

So this ancient dragon wasn’t here to attack the town.

“U-Uh, that’s because of me...” Sasa admitted.

“Aya!” exclaimed Lucy. “Why would you say that?!”

“Well, because...”

“Are you worried I will take offense because we are both types of dragon? I would never try to take vengeance for dragons defeated in battle.”

“Phew, I see.” Sasa sighed in relief. This dragon was really understanding.

“If the elementalists demands I stay away from this town, then I will refrain from these hunts.”

I mulled it over for a moment. *All it’s really doing is getting food.* After thinking, I called the tamer over.

“Wh-What is it?” She was shivering at the sight of the dragon in front of her.

“Can you be the local liaison for the dragon?” I asked.

“Me?! Talk with the dragon?!”

Her eyes went wide.

The dragon being so close to the town had caused a lot of fear, but if the people could communicate with it, things would be different. After all, the Jade Dragon had said it wouldn’t attack people.

“I can also lend my strength should the town ever be attacked by monsters,” it offered.

How friendly was this dragon?!

“Why are you so accommodating?” I asked.

The ancient dragon looked seriously at me. **“Allow me to answer your question with a question. What god do you follow?”** The dragon’s massive eyes were fixed on me.

“Well...”

Did it know?

It seemed to have read my mind because it continued. **“You follow that ancient goddess, do you not? My tribe said that an elementalist following her was to never be made an enemy.”**

“I...see?”

Noah’s apostles had made quite the name for themselves. With that much time...it had to have been the hero killer, Cain. He was my predecessor. How much fear had he earned?

So that’s what happened with the drakelings, Noah remarked in amusement. *Still, good for you. You didn’t need to fight.*

That’s right. However strong Sasa was, an ancient dragon was nothing to sneeze at.

After that exchange, the tamer and the dragon started discussing how they would communicate in the future.

Our guide was struggling for money, but if she was the only person who could talk with the ancient dragon, it would put her in a pretty good position. Hopefully, with this new role, she could keep her younger siblings well-fed.

“Can we head back now, my knight?” Furiae asked.

“Yeah. Looks like everything’s sorted.” We hadn’t wiped the dragon out, but the problem was nonetheless solved.

“Aya and I didn’t get covered with blood though,” Lucy said skeptically.

“Fuu’s divination was off the mark, then.”

“Wait just a minute!” Furiae protested. “It was *Future Sight*, not divination!

And don't talk like it's *never* right!"

The three of them had started getting into their discussion when suddenly, a voice echoed across the sands.

"S-Someone! Help!"

We looked in that direction and saw a carriage being attacked by monsters.

"We need to save them!" Sasa said, immediately surging forward.

But the ancient dragon acted first.

"Hmph... I can start already... GRAAAAH!"

The tamer screamed at the roar, and the monsters chasing the carriage turned tail and fled.

However, the real problem was yet to come.

The three birds pulling the traveler all scattered, breaking their connection with the carriage. Then, the carriage came barrelling toward us.

"We have to stop it!" Sasa quickly got in its path.

"A-Aya! That's dangerous!"

Actually, it was probably riskier for Lucy to stand next to her.

"Hyah."

Sasa caught the carriage with a loud crash. It was damaged, but it did stop safely.

Even *that* wasn't the main problem though...

This carriage was piled with freight. The darkness made it hard to see *what* the cargo was, but apparently, it was a load of food. Vegetables and the like.

Red fruit rained from the battered carriage as tomatoes spilled from it.

"What is this?"

"Ew, it's all gooey."

Sasa and Lucy...were covered in tomatoes.



“Oh,” Furiae said in realization. She was also stained red with juice and pulp.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“This is what I saw. It wasn’t blood.”

“M-My apologies, Elementalist,” the dragon said. He hadn’t done it on purpose though—he’d just been trying to help.

The trader driving the carriage had collapsed, so we helped them while the tamer caught the escaped birds.

Finally, our adventure was safely concluded.

The ancient dragon menacing the town was now a powerful protector. Trade was flourishing again, and the number of tourists had more than doubled with the chance to see the dragon up close. The tamer had also earned her success—she was given the role of dragon liaison.

It was all good. Everything was solved.

And yet...Sasa wasn’t happy.

“I was trying to do my best.” She sighed. “Takatsuki, you would’ve been enough on your own though. Can I even do this hero thing?”

She was really down.

“No, Sasa. If I’d been on my own, I would’ve been too scared to even try talking. It was only because you were there that I could do anything.”

“Really?” she asked doubtfully.

“You’re too uptight, Aya,” Lucy interjected, trying to cheer her up. “The next thing will come soon.”

“And I’ll use my *Future Sight* when it does!” Furiae exclaimed.

Sasa’s mood seemed to clear with their words. “Lu, Fuu... Thanks.”

I still had to say one thing, though.

“Can you make *Future Sight* a bit easier to use?” I asked.

“I thought that too,” Lucy added.

Sasa nodded. “Yup.”

“B-Be quiet!” Furiae sputtered.

“Still, it’s a good thing you didn’t both get covered in blood.”

The possibility of them getting injured was actually what I’d been the most concerned about. I didn’t know what I’d have done if they had been hurt. It seemed like her skill saw negative futures more easily, and that was bad for my heart.

“Hmph. I’ll be able to see perfectly sooner or later. I’ll charm you at the same time.”

“Yeah, don’t,” I retorted.

“You can’t,” Lucy added.

“No charming, Fuu.”

It made sense that she wanted to improve her abilities...but charming her allies wasn’t the way to do it.

And so, that was how Sasa’s first job as a hero ended.

We traveled back to Gamelan, and just before we were ready to leave for Roses, Princess Sophia arrived with a grave expression.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Hero Makoto, everyone. Please, listen calmly to what I have to say,” she prefaced. “The schedule has been set for the Northern Front Plan.”

Those words prompted tension in us all.

The Northern Front Plan referred to an expedition from our continent to the one to the north of us, commonly called the demon continent.

Three demon lords ruled that continent, and part of the plan...was eliminating them.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for picking up volume seven of *Zero Believers*. Our setting for this volume was Great Keith. Aya Sasaki—or Sasa—took an almost leading role. She had her magnificent evolution in this volume, but it was actually something I wanted to do since coming up with the *Action Game Player* skill in volume 2. I'm very happy I got to write it.

We're entering the climax of the story now and the next volume will contain the long-discussed Northern Front Plan. Volume six had a sealed demon lord, but the next to face our heroes will be demon lords living and active on the demon continent. The manga version serialized in Comic Gardo is currently at the spot when Makoto learns elemental magic, so there's a long way to go. Anyone who hasn't read it yet, I would love for you to take a look.

Finally, I want to thank Tam-U for the ever-cute girls and Hakuto Shiroi for the second volume of the manga adaptation. I also appreciate my Editor—N—for helping with the May release. To my readers, whether of the published or web versions, I hope you will continue to enjoy *Zero Believers*.

Full Clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero
Believers

7

The Hero of Incandescence
and the Lamia Queen

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

"DAMN IT!
WHAT
ARE YOU
PLAYING AT,
MAKOTO?"

Noah





"HUH...AYA?
NO WAY...
I'VE GOT TO BE
DREAMING."

THE FAMILIAR GIRL
STRETCHED AND
MUMBLED SLEEPILY.
I'D LAST SEEN HER AT
THE WATER TEMPLE.
SHE WAS ONE OF MY
CLASSMATES FROM
HIGH SCHOOL.

Keiko Kawakita

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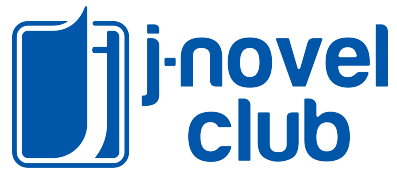
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by Isle Osaki

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